

PERCEPTION OF A MERGER: THE CASE OF PRELATERAL /e/ AND /æ/ IN MELBOURNE AND VICTORIA

Deborah Loakes, Janet Fletcher and John Hajek
School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne

The focus of this paper is the /e/-/æ/ sound change produced by some speakers of Australian English (AusEng) from Melbourne and Victoria, involving the loss of a contrast between the /e/ and /æ/ vowels when they occur prelaterally. This phenomenon also occurs in New Zealand English (NZEng) (e.g. Thomas & Hay 2005).

The /e/-/æ/ sound change was first observed by Bradley (1989). It has since been analysed using acoustic techniques by Cox and Palethorpe (2004) and Loakes (2008), who have shown that the sound change is underway for a number of AusEng speakers from Melbourne and Victoria. Despite the fact that listener (mis)perception is known to play a role in the promotion of sound change (e.g. Ohala 1981) to date there have been no perception studies on this phenomenon in AusEng.

We report the findings of two preliminary perception experiments designed to determine how well listeners can distinguish prelateral /e/ and /æ/. Experimental design was based on Thomas and Hay (2005) for NZEng. The stimuli were produced by a male speaker of AusEng from Sydney, who makes a clear /e/-/æ/ distinction. 427 participants, primarily 16-18 year old high school students (93.9%) and their teachers (6.1%), took part in the study. The majority of participants (89.6%) had only ever lived in Melbourne or Victoria.

For the first (forced choice) experiment, participants heard six minimal pairs, and were required to choose the correct word from the pair. Three non-prelateral items (the foil *show*, as well as *head* and *had*) were identified in 98.9% of cases, whereas the three prelateral items (*pellet*, *Ellie* and *tally*) were identified in 93.7% of cases. 83.5% of participants correctly identified all six items, 15.2% of participants made at least one error identifying prelateral vowels, and only 1.3% of participants made an error identifying the non-prelateral vowels or the foil. For the second (forced choice) experiment, participants heard four word pairs containing prelateral /e/ and /æ/ (i.e. *telly-tally*) and were required to choose the correct pair from a four combinations. Here, participants were less accurate, with only 74.2% of participants correctly identifying all four word pairs.

We discuss the role of production and perception in the /e/-/æ/ sound change in Melbourne and Victoria, and also present further results relating to the experiments (difficulty ratings, and the effect of socio-phonetic factors). Finally, we compare the results with studies analysing the same phenomenon in NZEng.

- Bradley, D. (1989a) "Regional dialects in Australian English phonology" in P. Collins and D. Blair *Australian English: The Language of a New Society* Univ. QLD Press, St. Lucia pp.261-270.
- Cox, P. & S. Palethorpe (2004) "The Border Effect: Vowel Differences across the NSW / Victorian Border" in C. Moskowsky (ed.) *Proceedings of the 2003 conference of the Australian Linguistics Society*, pp.1-14.
- Loakes, D. (2008) "Phonetic Evidence for Neutralisation of Prelateral /æ/ and /e/ in Melbourne English" poster presented at the *LabPhon 11 Conference*, Wellington, New Zealand, Jun 30-July 2.
- Ohala, J. J. (1981) "The listener as a source of sound change," in *Papers from the Parasession on Language and Behavior*, C. S. Masek, R. A. Hendrick, and M. F. Miller (eds.) Chicago Linguistic Society, Chicago, pp. 178-203.
- Thomas, B. and J. Hay (2005) "A Pleasant Malady: The Ellen/Allan merger in New Zealand English" *Te Reo* 48, pp.69-94.

Contact: Dr. Debbie Loakes, School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010 Australia.
Ph. +61 3 8344 4886. Fax +61 3 8344 8990, Email: dloakes@unimelb.edu.au