Purely a chain shift?: An exploration of "Canadian Shift" in the US Midland

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Recent studies of US Midland cities in Ohio and Illinois (Durian, 2008; Bigham, 2009) have found evidence of the "Canadian Shift" (henceforth "CS", the retraction of /æ/, /ɛ/, and among some speakers, /ɪ/, coupled with close/merged realization of /ɑ/ and /ɔ/), among speakers born after 1950. In addition, previous studies of Midland Ohio and Illinois cities suggest nuclear retraction of /aw/ may also be linked to /æ/-retraction among some post-1950 born speakers (Frazer, 1983; Thomas, 2001).

Previous studies of CS in Canada (e.g., Clarke, et al., 1995; Labov, et al., 2006) have treated it purely as a chain shift. Yet the combined results of the Midland studies cited above, as well as Boberg's (2005) study of CS in Montreal, suggest an alternative perspective yet to be explored previously—that CS may involve two components:

a) retraction of /æ/ (and possibly /aw/ in the Midland) linked to close/merged realization of /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ as a chain shift;

b) /ɛ/- and /ɪ/-retraction linked to /æ/-retraction as a parallel vowel shift akin to the fronting of /uw/, /ow/, and /aw/ in the US South (Thomas, 2001; Labov, et al., 2006).

We present results of an apparent time investigation exploring CS from both of these perspectives in Columbus, Ohio. Data are drawn from 32 speakers—16 males and 16 females belonging to 3 generational cohorts born between 1925-1990.

Our results reveal CS consists of two components in Columbus: a) parallel retraction of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ linked to /æ/-retraction; and b) chain shift involving /æ/- and /aw/-retraction linked to close/merged realization of /ɑ/ and /ɔ/, although /aw/-retraction is not found among all speakers. Furthermore, our results suggest front vowel parallel retraction may be an analogical development, involving speakers' cross-vowel-subsystemic generalization of the post-vocalic phonetic conditioning influencing retraction of /æ/, both to /ɛ/ and to /ɪ/.