Wedge-raising and fronting in the Inland South

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Variation in the realization of /Λ/ (BUT) in America continues to puzzle linguists. Eye dialect commonly renders White Southern and African-American Vernacular English pronunciations of words like just and such as jest and sech, which would seem to indicate fronting. Ladefoged (1975) describes the English /Λ/ as a back vowel, but Thomas (2001) claims that the canonical American variant is a central vowel, and some Southerners exhibit a central and raised variant. LAMSAS shows both raising and fronting scattered along the Atlantic states, with raising appearing slightly more concentrated in the Appalachian region (although transcription conventions are inconsistent). Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2006) state that fronting is an urban Midlands feature (in line with Thomas’ claim that the fronted variant is the American standard), but they do not describe variation in /Λ/ in the South at all, even though they confusingly claim that the fronted variant sounds characteristically rural. (This is likely due to their use of urban speech data, to the exclusion of that from rural areas.) Further complicating this situation is fact that in Southern speech, with which nonstandard realizations are typically associated, almost all vowels in the system exhibit socially-meaningful variation, so that there is no ‘anchor’ from which to measure /Λ/-raising or fronting acoustically.

This study uses sociolinguistic interviews with thirty (age- and education-stratified) long-term residents of Elliott County, in rural Eastern Kentucky, to explore variation in /Λ/. Both perceptual and acoustic measurements are used. Findings indicate fronting is indeed less perceptually marked than raising, and the raised variant is rapidly falling out of use, due to its stigmatization as ‘old-fashioned’, or ‘hick’. Also addressed is the methodological problem of how to acoustically study vowels in a rapidly-changing system in which all the vowels appear to be in flux.

References


