Local Spoken Here: The Phonology of Oregon English

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Labov’s division of the U.S. into three dialect areas defines the West (the third and largest of these) in relation to other North American dialects. The absence of “Canadian” Raising in /aw/ distinguishes it from Canadian English, the low back merger from the North East, absence of /ow/ fronting from the Midlands, and absence of glide deletion in /ay/ from the South (Labov et al. 2002). While there have been many studies of Californian English, other areas such as the Pacific Northwest have seen relatively little linguistic inquiry, despite the fact that the work which has been done suggests that the situation is more complex than is generally thought. Some findings in the area include prominent use of creaky voice (Ingle et al. 2005, Ward 2003), /_/ raising towards /e/ when followed by /g/ (Conn 2002), and lexical differences (Ward 2003), and some scholars have suggested that the Pacific Northwest constitutes the most distinct dialect in the West (Ward 2003). This paper is an investigation into the English spoken by Oregonians, using interviews with four consultants (age/class matched) from Corvallis, a small town in the Willamette Valley south of Portland. The formant values of 180 tokens (three tokens of 9 simple vowels from each speaker) were measured using Praat, the results of which support those found by others who have done work in the area (Conn 2002, Ingle et al. 2005, Ward 2003) and resemble Californian English, with a strongly fronted /u/ (F2 > 1600 Hz) and moderate /o/ fronting (F2 > 1100 Hz). In comparison to the Californian speakers, the data for all my speakers show more centralized front vowels (F2 for /i/ < 2100 Hz, and for /e/ < 1900 Hz). These findings help to build a valuable baseline against which future research can be compared.

Selected References
Conn, J. (2002). It’s not all rain and coffee: an investigation into the western dialect of Portland, Oregon. Paper presented at New Ways of Analyzing Variation 31, Stanford, California, USA.