Chain shift advancement by children

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This paper examines the propagation of chain shifts, using the Canadian Shift (CS) as an example. The CS involves lowering and/or backing of the English vowels /æ/ and /ɛ/. It was first noted by Clarke, Elms and Youssef (1995) and has since been confirmed to be in progress in many regions across Canada (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006), including Vancouver, British Columbia (Esling and Warkentyne 1993). This study investigates the age at which children in Vancouver advance the Shift beyond the stage evident in the speech of their elders.

Sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with parents, teens (ages 13-15) and children (6-11) from 16 middle-class Vancouver families (n=39). 966 tokens of /æ/ and /ɛ/ were collected from wordlist or picture-naming data, normalized (Nearey 1977) and measured acoustically using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2009). Results confirm an active, female-led shift in Vancouver: for both vowels, every female group is more shifted than every corresponding male group except for the parents’ /ɛ/ measures, which do not differ by sex. For /æ/, male children are more shifted than male teens and parents, and female children are more shifted than female teens and parents (for all, \( p<0.01 \)). For /ɛ/, female children are more shifted than female teens and parents (\( p<0.001 \)) but male children are only marginally so (\( p=0.06 \)). Results suggest that the CS is being advanced by children, in particular girls, and that advancement could be occurring in children as young as 6. Therefore, principles of chain shifting (see Labov 1994) are likely active from childhood, yet enduring sex differences among the children suggest that social factors such as sensitivity to peer-group membership, proposed to be instrumental in chain shift propagation among teens (eg. Eckert 1989), may be relevant to the youngest school-age children.

References