

## **Style and attitude: The social evaluation of the BET vowel**

Recent research by Wagner et al. (2016) found that the expected vowel system in Lansing, MI, the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006), was changing in unexpected ways. The BAT vowel was lowering and backing before pre-oral consonants, rather than fronting and raising. The BOT vowel was backing rather than fronting. But, the BET vowel was moving down and back, in the expected direction of the NCS. These findings make sense if we assume that rather than abandoning the NCS, young Lansingites are in fact adopting another vowel shift, the Elsewhere Shift (ES), also known as the Canadian/Californian/Third Dialect Shift, where BAT lowers and retracts, BOT backs to merge with BOUGHT, and BET also lowers and backs (Eckert 2004).

BAT and BOT are earlier stage shifts than BET in both the NCS and ES, so while a number of studies have looked at these vowels (e.g. Ito 2001, Bigham 2009, Roeder 2010, Villarreal 2018 a.o.), few have examined BET in isolation. Furthermore, in production, Wagner et al. (2016) found it to be the only vowel continuing to shift in Lansing, with females more advanced than males.

But is BET's continued movement in Lansing a purely structural consequence, leftover from the NCS or newly acquired from the ES? Or is shifted BET subconsciously associated with positive social meanings, and also happens to align with the structural mechanics of the chain-shift?

To answer this question, we first examine the results of a matched-guise attitudinal survey, conducted with 930 college-aged individuals from lower- and mid-Michigan. Results indicate that for females, BET-lowering is associated with higher intelligence, confidence, articulateness, and friendliness, a factor grouping similar to the "general prestige" marker associated with backed-BAT in Kansas (Villareal, Kohn & Hattesoehl 2017).

We also examine style-shifting in sociolinguistic interviews conducted with 31 college-aged individuals from Lansing, MI. In our results, we find that speakers lower (though do not back) BET in careful speech compared to casual speech, with females style-shifting to a greater degree than males. The lack of backing may suggest that BET-backing may be nearing completion, and continued movement in that direction is not a viable option. Alternatively, it may be that lowering but not backing of BET is positively evaluated, and that backing is a result of structural pressure.

By utilizing both style-shifting and the matched-guise task to elicit subconscious attitudes, we find that continued movement of BET in Lansing has positive associations and may not (only) be due to structural forces of the vowel system. Furthermore, that females show a greater degree of style-shifting and stronger positive associations with lowered BET mirrors the apparent time data in Lansing, with females lower and backer than males; it also provides evidence that females lead change both in production and evaluation of a variable.

Investigating the social meaning of a sound change allows for better interpretation of production data. Subsequent work could examine other lesser studied elements of the NCS and ES to further understand the motivations and patterns of sound change.

## References

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