

1. INTRODUCTION

IN 2012, A GROUP of Western U.S. sociolinguists came together for an informal meeting at Stanford University to discuss current research on Western U.S. English dialects. The initiative was an attempt to find ways to align our research interests and encourage more work on the vastly understudied English dialects of this American region. As a result of this meeting, several participants began discussing how to synthesize our work on Western speech and organized a panel at the 2015 meeting of the American Dialect Society in Portland, Oregon. This book and the anticipated second volume to follow are a direct result of this initiative and the research presented at the ADS panel.

Our goal here is not only to examine more closely contemporary Western English dialects, but, more importantly, to build on the groundwork laid by Labov, Ash, and Boberg in their impressive *Atlas of North American English* (2006). The picture so far developed for the Western U.S. consists of both similarities and differences across the region. Simultaneously, however, it is a picture that is still only partially fleshed out, particularly in terms of how the vowel features relevant to a number of U.S. dialects are realized by Western speakers from a variety of ecologically and socially diverse backgrounds.

The chapters that follow focus on how a number of regionally defining differences in vowel positions are instantiated in parts of the West with very different migratory histories and, in modern times, with very different senses of place and practice. Owing to a dearth of concentrated sociolinguistic research in this region, knowledge of how extensive and how similar these vowel systems are across the U.S. West has been limited to broad overviews, such as that provided by Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2006), or in isolated studies of different aspects of phonology in a few Western states (Terrell 1976; Hinton et al. 1987; Luthin 1987; Moonwomon 1987; Di Paolo and Faber 1990; Faber and Di Paolo 1995; Hagiwara 1997; Fought 1999; Hall-Lew 2005, 2010; Conn 2006; Bowie 2008; Fridland and Macrae 2008; Fridland and Kendall 2012; Kendall and Fridland 2012; Kennedy and Grama 2012). This volume aims to serve as a point of departure for descriptions of the ways that American English vowels are phonetically variable within the West by examining the same key vowels in several different locales across the region. In this volume, we focus on the continental West

Coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington, with an anticipated volume still to come focusing on the Inland West.

The chapters in this volume address several of the most salient features associated with contemporary U.S. Western vowels—the low back vowel merger, short front vowel retraction, back vowel fronting, and, where relevant, the raising and fronting of /æ/ and /ɛ/ before /g/ (also called prevelar raising). A number of these features have been noted in other regions, for example, back vowel fronting in the South and Midwest, and short vowel retraction and low back merger in Canada (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006). We do not treat these vowel changes as a necessarily interconnected series of changes as has sometimes been done elsewhere or assume there is a relationship among the Western features and those found in other dialects. Instead, with this volume we attempt to clarify the types of phonetic variation found across the West and how they pattern in similar or distinct ways among speakers within the region and to note features that also appear in other regions of the United States. While previous research has often referred to changes in vowel systems in the U.S. West as a “vowel shift”—namely, the Canadian Vowel Shift or the California Vowel Shift—we employ caution when using this terminology to frame the work undertaken in the following chapters for two reasons. First, some scholars may use the term “shift” to refer to unrelated changes in a system, while others wish to suggest changes in a system that are systematically related, such as that described by Labov (1994). Avoiding the term “shift” limits such ambiguity. Second, it seems that the linguistic and chronological relationship among vowel changes in the U.S. West has not yet been firmly established. Therefore, referring to these changes as a chain shift (in the sense of Labov 1994) seems premature. A number of the salient features described in these chapters do appear to be recent variants and therefore might be considered changes in U.S. Western speech appearing this century. However, we hope the present research invites questions about and study of where these features began, are going, and how they are connected to similar features in Western vowel systems (or elsewhere) rather than seeking to make definitive claims about a “shift” pattern. As a reviewer so aptly put it, our goal here is to fill in the “there be dragons” areas of the map, areas that until now have simply fallen under the umbrella of the larger Western U.S. region.

It is important to note that authors of the chapters in this volume have used different elicitation materials and methodological approaches. Each author notes what procedures and measurement techniques were used in the data collection and analysis. This should be borne in mind when comparing across studies. For the purpose of clarity and continuity, authors use the conventions of the International Phonetic Alphabet throughout the

chapters, though, in many cases, keywords in a B–T frame are used to highlight particular word classes and subclasses, following other recent PADS volumes (Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2009). These frames are based upon those made for comparative study of English dialects by Wells (1982) but have been adapted to allow representation of the particular vowel changes and conditioning environments of interest to the present study of the U.S. West. Table 1.1 overviews this adopted Wellsian convention system, presenting lax vowels first, then tense, followed by diphthongs and (r)-colored vowels.

To help orient the reader with the areas under study in the chapters that follow, figure 1.1 presents a map depicting the Western portion of the United States with study locations identified. Each chapter also includes a map of the specific area explored in its study. We start our exploration of the West by examining vowel production in California. California is, in fact, one of the more extensively studied states in terms of Western speech, with recent work by Eckert (2008), Hall-Lew (2009, 2011), Podesva (2011), and Kennedy and Grama (2012), as well as early work by DeCamp (1958–59), the California Style Collective (e.g., Hinton et al. 1987; Moonwomon 1987), Luthin (1987), and Hagiwara (1997). Such work laid the foundation for the chapters included here, but this collection moves beyond the coastal urban speech described in such works to include more understudied areas inland and also to investigate perceptual aspects of vowel variation.

Chapter 2, “The Low Vowels in California’s Central Valley,” by D’Onofrio, Eckert, Podesva, Pratt, and Van Hofwegen, examines the vowels from the state’s interior. This study, in contrast to most previous research

TABLE 1.1
B–T Frame Guide

<i>Wells Keyword</i>	<i>U.S. English</i>	<i>B–T Frame</i>	<i>Wells Keyword</i>	<i>U.S. English</i>	<i>B–T Frame</i>
KIT	ɪ	BIT	GOOSE	u	BOOT
DRESS	ɛ	BET	PRICE	aɪ	BITE
TRAP	æ	BAT	CHOICE	ɔɪ	BOY
LOT	ɑ ~ a	BOT	MOUTH	aʊ	BOUT
CLOTH	ɔ ~ a	BOUGHT	NEAR	ɪɪ ~ ɪɪ	BEER
THOUGHT			SQUARE	ɛɪ	BARE
STRUT	ʌ	BUT	START	ɑɪ	BAR
FOOT	ʊ	BOOK	NORTH	ɔɪ	BORE
NURSE	ɜɪ	BURT	FORCE	oɪ	BURR
FLEECE	i	BEET	CURE	ʊɪ	
FACE	e	BAIT	LETTER	əɪ	
GOAT	o	BOAT	COMMA	ə	

FIGURE 1.1
The Western United States



in California, investigates variation in the low vowels in three nonurban inland communities in the Central Valley: Bakersfield, Merced, and Redding (see figure 1.1). Focusing on /æ/, /a/, and /ɔ/, the authors find that all three low vowel classes appear to be undergoing change, conditioned by community and sex in particular ways for each vowel class. While they find variation across all three communities that suggests they are in line with larger California norms, their work reveals that speakers in these sites have taken different routes to the contemporary vowel space. In other words, though similar to the vowel norms reported in other research on English in California, subtle differences indicated that “place” as locally defined is important in shaping the vowel system of these speakers

Chapter 3, “Between California and the Pacific Northwest: The Front Lax Vowels in San Francisco English,” by Cardoso, Hall-Lew, Kementchedjhiya, and Purse, moves back to the coast, closely examining vowel variants

in contemporary San Francisco speech, an urban community that, in early work, did not always show consistent Western speech features (e.g., exhibiting resistance to the low back vowel merger). Here, the area is revisited to explore the presence or absence of two Western U.S. English features in San Francisco: the retraction of the short front vowels and prenasal /æ/ raising found elsewhere in California and the prevelar raising of /ɛ/ and /æ/, features more often associated with Pacific Northwest English. In addition to providing an updated look at vowel variants first noted by Hinton et al. (1987) and building on earlier work by Hall-Lew (2010, 2011), Cardoso et al. also consider the role of ethnic group membership on participation in vowel variation, in particular comparing European Americans and Chinese Americans living in the same San Francisco neighborhood.

Moving beyond production norms, chapter 4, “Do I Sound Like a Valley Girl to You?’: Perceptual Dialectology and Language Attitudes in California,” by Villarreal, examines what Californians themselves hear when listening to and rating speakers from various parts of the state. While often noted by outsiders as a salient speech variety (for example, *Saturday Night Live*’s parody “The Californians”), Californians’ own perception of their speech, and in particular how it is affected by vowel positions, has not been widely studied. In this chapter, Villarreal examines residents’ own perceptions of California speech to find how accurately Californians recognize speakers from different areas of the state and where they assess the most correct or pleasant speech to be located. A unique aspect of this research compared to earlier perceptual dialectology studies in California is its use of speech stimuli with varying concentrations of California vowel features, such as /æ/ retraction and /o/ fronting. This chapter provides a sense of how the vowel variants discussed in the earlier chapters on California vowels are viewed by Californians themselves.

Our next chapters move out of California and turn to the Pacific Northwest. Arguably the youngest of the continental North American dialect regions, the Pacific Northwest (including Washington, Oregon, and Idaho) has been subject to ongoing, variable linguistic input since the introduction of English to the region. While California’s early migratory flows were predominantly from Eastern cities, such as New York, and Ohio coupled with substantial European and Mexican settlement, the Pacific Northwest had more early transnational migration by travelers originating from states in the American Midwest (including Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio), New England, and the American South. In addition, both Washington and Oregon, the states included in this volume, had substantial and diverse Native American populations that contributed to the diversity of speech in each area. In the chapters on Oregon and Washington speech, we see that mod-

ern Pacific Northwest speech still lays claim to some unique features but variably also shows evidence of the vowel norms found in California.

We start our exploration of the Pacific Northwest just south of the border with Canada. In chapter 5, “The Vowels of Washington State,” Wassink examines Washington State English from the perspective of both previously noted Pacific Northwest features and more general Western features, such as back vowel fronting and the low back vowel merger. The study pays close attention to advancement of a feature first noted by Carroll Reed (1961, 561) in data collected for the Linguistic Atlas of the Pacific Northwest in 1953–63, the raising of /æ/ in voiced prevelar contexts, referred to as prevelar raising by Wassink et al. (2009). Here Wassink finds that the change has advanced beyond its distribution in Reed’s day. One key distinctive aspect of the Pacific Northwest is its particular type of cultural diversity. Washington is unlike Eastern states such as Pennsylvania and New York, where strong ethnic enclaves formed not long after initial settlement. Interethnic contact has been a sustained part of Washington State history. Data from a multiethnic sample of 73 Washingtonians, distributed throughout the western, central, and eastern parts of the state, show widespread participation in Western features, as well as the newer changes specific to the Pacific Northwest.

From there, we move to Oregon, a state situated between Washington State and California. It is this placement, this proximity to multiple dialect influences, that informs “Variation in West Coast English: The Case of Oregon,” by Becker, Aden, Best, and Jacobson. Examining the speech of 34 Oregonians, Becker et al. examine prevelar raising, a feature previously associated with Washington State, as well as features such as /o/ fronting and the low back vowel merger considered to be more panregional. Finally, the authors look for any evidence of the California vowel features discussed in the initial chapters, such as front short vowel retraction. Their work finds a linguistic melting pot of sorts in Oregon, with aspects of Washington State and California features, as well as general Western features, variably realized, though most are not fully instantiated. Using a perceptual map task, their research also suggests this variation in degree of participation in regional norms depends on speakers’ ideologies about accent; that is, respondents whose map task suggests an ideology of nonaccent show different vowel realization than other speakers.

The final study, “Investigating the Development of the Contemporary Oregonian English Vowel System,” by McLarty, Kendall, and Farrington, complements the research of Becker and colleagues by examining three generational cohorts of Oregon speakers to trace the development of the current Oregonian vowel configuration. With an eye toward track-

ing how vowel classes have changed over the course of the twentieth century, McLarty et al. use both contemporary speakers and archival speakers recorded in 1967 (years of birth, 1890–1914) for the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE 1985–2013). They observe in both the contemporary sample and the archival data well-established Western features, such as the low back vowel merger, as well as newly noted features in neighboring states, such as short front vowel retraction and /o/ fronting, to establish which features are most relevant to Oregon speech and the time depth of those features.

In the chapters that follow, we hope to provide an impetus to other language scholars and dialectologists to look more closely at the complexity of larger vowel patterns as realized in local communities. Though much of this work is descriptive, the volume takes the important first steps toward understanding the vowel changes that have moved through the Western United States this past century and that continue to shape speech in the Western states.

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