

Canadian Raising as a Preservation of Earlier Vowel Pronunciations

Canadians use a different diphthong than the rest of us, in certain cases, because Canadian English preserves an earlier vowel pronunciation. Classroom discussion on certain Canadian pronunciations in connection with the Great Vowel Shift inspired a desire to explore this peculiarity and learn more about vowel pronunciation in Canadian English and its apparent disconnection from the later stages of change during the Great Vowel Shift. Discussion in class seemed to indicate that Canadian English's peculiarities are attributable to two co-dependent factors: linguistic change occurring at a reduced rate in Northern climes as compared to Southern regions, coupled with strong influence from Scottish immigrants to Canada prior to the end of the Great Vowel Shift. Exploring this phenomenon leads to two areas of focus. The first is an exploration of the linguistic phenomenon. Does it have a formal term or name that describes it? What are the exact differences in pronunciation between Canadian English and the Received Pronunciation? At what stage of the Great Vowel Shift does Canadian pronunciation break from the rest of the English variants that were affected by the Shift? The second is a study of history. When did Europeans first begin settling into what we now know as Canada? How long after the first Europeans settled did the first English-speaking Europeans settle? When did larger groups of immigrants settle in the area? Where did these immigrants come from?

This phenomenon is known to linguists as “Canadian Raising”. Canadian Raising as a term was first coined by Canadian linguist Jack Chambers in 1973¹. The peculiarity itself occurs when many Canadians and others—typically those living in close proximity to the U.S.-Canada border, though aspects of this dialectal feature may have made their way further south²—pronounce diphthongs from a higher place when the diphthong comes just before a voiceless consonant such as /f/, /θ/, /t/, or /s/. The result is a shift most affecting the /aɪ/ and /aʊ/ sounds. Due to Canadian Raising, these sounds move up and become something closer to /əɪ/ and /əʊ/, respectively. Favourite or frequent examples of this are the words *out* and *about*, which are occasionally transcribed as *oot* and *aboot* to attempt to convey (albeit poorly) the difference in pronunciation to those unfamiliar with Canadian Raising. These differences would indicate that Canadian English, for some reason, skipped or ignored the 8th stage of the Great Vowel Shift, wherein /əɪ/ and /əʊ/ became /aɪ/ and /aʊ/.

Per *The English Language* by Barber, Beal, and Shaw, the Great Vowel Shift begins in the early fifteenth century with the diphthongization that transformed /i:/ and /u:/ into /əɪ/ and /əʊ/ (p. 202). Disregarding the Norse settlement in roughly 1000 CE, the first Europeans to enter Canada arrived at the late end of the fifteenth century, just after the Great Vowel Shift had begun. Early settlement attempts were made by the English and the French throughout the sixteenth century, and English, French, and Scottish immigrants made their way to Canada, though French immigrants quickly came in fewer and fewer numbers³. Due to the outnumbering of the French, English and Scottish would reasonably have had much greater influence on the spoken word. Combined with the isolation from England itself, which was undergoing most of the Great Vowel Shift after Canada had begun to be settled, it seems to be the case that Canadian Raising is a dialectal feature that preserves a very early pronunciation of Shift-affected vowels.

¹ Michelle Magnan, 2005. “Retiring linguistics prof identified unique characteristics of Canadian speech” <https://magazine.utoronto.ca/research-ideas/culture-society/unique-canadian-sayings-canadian-english-jack-chamber-s-u-of-t-linguistics/>

² Katie Carmichael, 2020. “The rise of Canadian raising of /aʊ/ in New Orleans English” <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/33ee41df-fe5e-49a1-b4a4-f69009d0a57b/content>

³ Wikipedia. “History of Canada” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Canada