GOOSE on the move: A study of /u/-fronting in Australian news speech

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Abstract

This study is concerned with sound change over time in Australian English. The aim was to determine via acoustic analysis whether there is evidence of /u/-fronting in a speaker population of elderly and middle-aged male newsreaders. Results showed that the middle-aged group was producing /u/ further towards the front of the vowel space than the elderly group in their original recording, and that several individual speakers have also fronted their realisation of /u/ over time. This would seem to confirm a move away from the ‘Cultivated’ accent previously required in broadcasting towards the ‘General’ sociollect of AusE.

1. Introduction

The fronting of /u/ over time is an aspect of language change that has been noted in other varieties of English including Received Pronunciation (RP), and in Australian English by researchers such as Cox & Palethorpe [1], but to date it has not been the specific focus of studies on AusE. Bernard [2] determined that the retraction of /u/ in AusE equated to a more Cultivated sociolect i.e. it more closely approximated Received Pronunciation or RP.

Cox and Palethorpe [1] conducted a diachronic ‘trend’ analysis comparing two equivalent groups of adolescent male speakers over a 30-year timespan and found that /u/ had raised and fronted. Although real-time ‘panel’ studies are appreciated as a valuable means of uncovering sound change, the difficulty of obtaining data from the same individuals over a long period of time makes them a rarity. As part of a larger research project the current paper not only examines /u/-fronting in the connected speech of two consecutive generations of male newsreaders at one point in time, it also looks at intraspeaker changes that have occurred 50 and 25 years later respectively.

2. Method

Interviews were conducted with a range of current and former Australian radio and television newsreaders, during which they were asked to re-read an excerpt from one of their own archival news bulletins. The timespan between recordings was roughly 50 years for the elderly speakers and 25 years for the middle-aged group. Eight speakers were selected for analysis (4 elderly males aged between 79 and 82, and 4 middle-aged males aged between 45 and 50). There was an average of 7 /u/ tokens for analysis per recording for all speakers except one (who had only 4 per recording). All words containing primary-stressed /u/ (except those following /j/) were extracted for each speaker and edited into individual sound files. In almost every case the same words were extracted from both recordings. Vowel targets were deemed to be the mid-point of the section where the first and second formants were parallel and showed least deviation. Vowel charts were created by plotting F1 against F2.

3. Results

Figure 1 (below) shows the average measurements of the midpoint of /u/ for each speaker, with the arrow showing the direction of change from the original recording to the re-read. A preliminary analysis shows that with the exception of speaker RP (who sounds more Cultivated), the middle-aged speakers produce /u/ further to the front of the vowel space than the elderly speakers for both their original recording and their re-read. There would appear to be greater variation amongst the middle-aged group, with PM and TT even retracting between their original and re-reads. As they already had General-Broad accents at the time of their original recording they were perhaps unable to shift any further forward without encroaching on the area of the vowel space devoted to /i/. There is also evidence of /u/-lowering, particularly for the elderly speakers, which may be an age-related effect.

4. Conclusions

The results show that /u/ has fronted over time for the majority of speakers, and this seems to correspond with a shift away from the RP-like accent of broadcasting. For this corpus then, F2 for /u/ may be used as a reasonably reliable indicator of accent broadness. In contrast to Cox & Palethorpe’s findings of fronting and raising [1], the elderly speakers also show evidence of lowering in the vowel space. More investigation is required but this may be the result of ageing.

5. References
