Since its first description by Clarke, Elms and Youssef (1995), the Canadian Shift (CS) has been recognized as among the most salient sociophonetic phenomena in contemporary Canadian English. Though it is widely recognized that /æ/ and /e/ are generally retracting and lowering (Labov et al. 2006), studies across Canada have reported varying acoustic characteristics; it is also poorly understood how vowel shifts such as the CS operate in perception. This paper presents the results of a pair of experiments that aim to describe the trajectory of the Montreal CS in relation to other Canadian cities and investigate the perceptual consequences of this change in progress.

Sentence list data from Jewish Anglophone Montrealers (n=28) confirms the movement of /æ/ and /e/ in production, showing significant apparent-time /æ/ retraction \[F(1,24)=38.2, p<.0001\], and /e/ lowering \[F(1,24)=8.5, p=.007\] as well as retraction \[F(1,24)=8.5, p=.007\] (MATH and HELL sounding more like MOTH and HULL). The same set of participants perceptually categorized vowel stimuli varying in F1 and F2 as members of the BET, BAT, BUT, or BOUGHT phonemic classes; age and gender show no significant predictive effects along the BAT-BOUGHT and BET-BAT continua, but younger people are significantly more likely than their elders to accept tokens with low F2 values as BET \[z=2.2, p=.03\] rather than BUT.

By comparing the current status of /æ/ and /e/ with previous findings from Montreal and other Canadian cities, it is argued that the production results represent real-time movement of the Montreal short vowels as well as an apparent-time view of the geographic diffusion of the CS across Canada. Intergenerational perceptual differences seem to manifest themselves not in the more established BET–BAT and BAT–BOUGHT movements, but rather along the BET–BUT dimension; according to Roeder and Jarmasz’s (2010) model, this is the most incipient stage of the CS.

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