

20. The West

20.1. The definition of the West

Map 20.1 shows the borders of the West and its neighbors. This was the last dialect defined in Chapter 11 (Map 11.10); a fairly complex definition was required to separate the West from Canada, the North, the North Central region, the Midland, and the South. The heart of this definition is that the West is an area where the low back merger predominates (as distinct from the North and the South); and where /uw/ is fronted but /ow/ is not (as distinct from the Midland where both are fronted); but other restrictions were also required. The end product was a dialect area with low homogeneity (.56) and moderately low consistency (.62).

The situation can be clarified if we consider the relations of the West to each of its neighbors separately. The distinction from the South is simple and clear. There are no instances of glide deletion before obstruents among the Telsur speakers in the West.¹ The West differs from the Midland in the conservative treatment of /ow/ and in the completeness of the low back merger. However, these boundaries are not sharp. Map 20.2 shows that the centralization of /ow/ can be found variably in the West. As for the low back merger, Map 9.2 shows that there are six speakers in western Kansas who fall into the Midland area and have the low back merger in all allophones; the rest of the Midland displays in that map a predominance of the (orange) transitional symbols. The West is also distinguished from the North on the basis of the low back merger, but here again there is a sizeable intermediate area. More than a few speakers in the transitional zone between West and North show a complete low back merger.

As noted in the discussion of Map 11.13, the North Central area is specifically differentiated from the West in its conservative treatment of /uw/.

The differentiation from Canada is the most problematic because of the high degree of similarity between the varieties of English spoken in most of Canada and the western U.S. Map 11.7 showed that the Canadian Shift does not extend into the West across the Canadian border: there are no points near the Canadian border that are marked with dark red symbols in that map. However, there are nine dark red symbols within the isogloss defining the West in Map 11.10. Even when the dialect conditions for the West are superimposed, five of these points remain dark red – they satisfy the criteria for the Canadian Shift, but not the criteria for the West. The low homogeneity of the West as defined here is due to this tendency towards the Canadian Shift as well as speakers with incomplete low back merger. Historically, this heterogeneity results from a mixture of Northern, Midland, and Southern settlement.

The fronting of /ow/ in the West

The characterization of the West as an area where /uw/ is fronted but not /ow/ is generally valid, as our overall comparison of dialects will show. But Map 20.2 indicates that this criterion is not a homogeneous feature of the West.

The northeastern corner of the West shares the conservative treatment of /ow/ that is a property of the North, indicated by the dark blue circles: these are associ-



ated with an F2 of /ow/ that is less than 1100 Hz. There is also a slight fronting of /ow/ (F2 above 1100 and below 1200 Hz) indicated by pale-blue circles in the central area of Nevada and Utah. An even more common pattern is a moderately fronted /ow/, indicated by the turquoise circles that are keyed to an F2 of 1200 to 1300 Hz. This forms a belt in the western, southern, and eastern portions of the West. Although there is considerable variation in all three of these portions of the West, the moderate fronting pattern is heavily concentrated in this area: 16 of the 19 turquoise symbols in the West are located in the area between the oriented light blue isogloss and the turquoise isogloss. There are only three red symbols registering the full centralization characteristic of advanced speakers in the Midland and the South – in San Diego.

/aw/ in the West

The West is also differentiated from surrounding regions by the behavior of /aw/, the third back upgliding vowel, though this criterion shows the same variability as with /ow/. Map 20.3 shows that the West is characterized by a relatively conservative treatment of /aw/. Thirty-three of the Western speakers are designated by green circles, which represent a central location for the nucleus for /aw/ between 1450 and 1650 Hz. Canada and the North generally show much backer nuclei for /aw/, and the South much fronter, with some clear exceptions: Vancouver and Winnipeg in Canada show the same degree of fronting as the West, and three Western cities (Seattle, Los Angeles, and Tucson) feature at least one speaker who attains the more extreme degree of fronting seen in the South. The position of /aw/ is less useful in distinguishing the West from the Midland: although some Midland communities (like Kansas City) show extreme fronting and raising of this nucleus, other Midland speakers share the central position of /aw/ with the West. However, a central location for /aw/ is one of the most uniform features of the West, even if it is not exclusive to this region, just as glide deletion before resonants appears in the belt of South Midland territory just outside the South.



Southern features in the West

It is well known that settlement of the southwestern United States involved contributions from the South, with a strong component from Texas and Oklahoma. The phonological consequences of this settlement pattern are not enough to extend the South westward beyond Texas, but effects are found in several scattered remnants of Southern speech. Map 20.4 shows a “Southwest” region that is marked by such some representation of Southern features.

Map 20.4 carries over the extreme fronting of /aw/ from Map 20.3 with red circles. Two of these appear in the Southwest. In addition, the pink symbols show



¹ The separation from the South on the basis of the low back merger is not so clear. Four Telsur speakers in West Texas show a complete merger, consistent with the reports of the progress of the low back merger in the Texas survey of Bailey et al. (1991).