Working Title: "Shifty Vowels: Variation in Dialectal Lowering in Gitksan"

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Abstract:

Gitksan is a Tsimshianic language spoken by the peoples living along the upriver areas of the Skeena river, British Columbia (Rigsby, 1986; Tarpent, 1987). Two dialects are identified: 'East' and 'West' (Rigsby, 1986). There are socio-culturally distinct and linguistically variable groups within these categories, including similarity with Nisgha (Tarpent, 1987), creating a dialect continuum.

This paper provides an overview of the environments in which uvular lowering of vowels occurs across dialects. Uvular lowering has been previously attested in Gitksan (Brown, 2010; Yamane-Tanaka, 2006) as well as cross-linguistically within neighboring language families (Bessell, 1992; Walker & Rose, 2015). This paper incorporates existing research on uvular lowering and vowel inventory structures in Gitksan into a phonological account of the alternation of the short vowels [a] and [ɛ] (Rigsby, 1986).

This paper analyses two word lists, demonstrating patterns of vowel lowering adjacent to uvulars and the dialectal alternation of short [a, ɛ]. Measurements of F1, F2, and their slope over long vowels are presented as evidence of uvular lowering, contrasted between varying speakers. This paper uses a phonological rule-based account of the distribution of [a, ɛ], supported by analysis of vowel qualities.

The paper concludes by presenting preliminary conclusions relating to an overall vowel shift within dialects of Gitksan, drawing parallels to English dialectology (Prichard, 2015; Riebold, 2015). I suggest that both variations in uvular lowering between speakers and phonological alternations of [a, ɛ] are evidence of a systemic shift in vowel quality between dialects, which creates predictable alternations when analysed as such. Future directions for this research include exploration into the reality of the underlying phoneme of both [a, ɛ], as well as further analysis of the overall vowel shift.