1. Introduction

Back Vowel Fronting (BVF) has been described in several N. Am dialects, in some cases affecting only GOOSE and GOAT (Labov 1984, Labov et al. 2005), and in others, FOOT as well (Fridland & Bartlett 2006, Eckert 2008, Podevain et al. 2015). New York City English (NYCE) has generally been described as conservative with respect to BVF (Labov et al. 2005), however, Newman (2014) reports some fronting of post-coronal /u/ (‘too’) among Whites and Asians. In addition, Wong (2014) reports some fronting of HOOP (non-post-coronal, non-pre-lateral /u/) among younger Chinese-Americans. There are no published large-sample production studies of BVF in NYCE.

2. Method

Subjects: Subjects were 58 self-identified women, 39 men, with year of birth ranging from 1906 to 2001 (M=1975), and residents of five boroughs, Nassau or Suffolk from age nine: 14 were Asian, 18 Black, 27 Latinx, 38 White. Six samples are oral histories recorded through Bronx Oral History Archive. 91 samples are sociolinguistic interviews by student researchers gathered 2015-2017.

Materials & procedure: 34,035 vowels were measured at 35% of duration using FAVE-Extract (Rosenfelder et al. 2014) and Prosodylab-Aligner (Gorman et al. 2015). Vowels /u/ were measured on pre-lateral /u/ among younger Chinese-Americans. There are no published reports on BVF elsewhere, the analysis revealed no effects of gender, class or ethnicity (Godinez & Maddieson 1985, Fridland & Bartlett 2006; Eckert 2008). BVF correlates weakly across speakers with use of innovative variants for thought and short-a.

3. Results

Four main findings

1. Age effects. The analysis reveals age effects on F2 for TOO, GOAT, FOOT and FOOT lexical sets starting with speakers born > 1981. The analysis reveals moderate to strong cross-speaker correlations in mean F2 values across these four lexical sets suggesting a single process of change affecting the four lexical sets.

2. No ethnicity/class effects. Unlike reports on BVF elsewhere, the analysis revealed no effects of gender, class or ethnicity (Godinez & Maddieson 1985, Fridland & Bartlett 2006; Hall-Lew 2003).

3. Weak cross-speaker correlation with low vowel changes. Our results align with results suggesting that two well-described low vowel changes (short-a reorganization and thought-lowering) are similarly distributed across speakers (Labov 1986; Becker 2010, Newlin-Łukowicz 2016). BVF, however, correlates weakly across speakers with these features. The present results, moreover, suggest that BVF began more recently than the low vowel changes.

4. Emergent stylistic meaning of BVF. These facts suggest BVF may index a different set of social meanings than the low-vowel changes, which are more prominent in local metalinguistic discourse (Cutler 2018). The lack of gender, class or ethnicity effects in the analysis of BVF fronting points to the importance of looking for ways in which identity emerges in speakers’ responses to metalinguistic and metapragmatic questions (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). Testing what internal variants (e.g. high rising terminals, low-back merger) and/or external factors (e.g. musical taste, cultural affiliation, aspirational identities, etc.) might be associated with BVF can help uncover what social meaning(s) it has for speakers who use it.