

AUSTRALIAN LOWERING:

A Study of One Dialect Difference Between Canadian and Australian Spoken English

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The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast dialects of Canadian and Australian English regarding the occurrence of the high front tense vowel /i/. I assume a common underlying representation for both dialects; it is irrelevant for present purposes that the vowel /i/ probably has a more abstract source.

For Canadian speakers the following variations of the upper front unrounded vowel have been found:

	I		II
read	[riyd]	reef	[rɪf]
relieve	[rɛliyv]	release	[rɛli:s]

The high front tense vowel is noticeably shorter in duration in the words of the second column. Also, there is a noticeable high off-glide to the vowel in the first column, while any glide which may be in the words of the second column is not so noticeable, and indeed seems to be absent entirely. I have indicated these slight but consistent phonetic differences by writing a glide where it is readily perceptible (col. I) and none where it is apparently absent (col. II). The shorter vowel has been marked \checkmark .

What appears to be happening is that the vowel is shortened before a voiceless consonant:

Vowel Shortening

V ---> \checkmark V/___[-voice]

In words where the vowel occurs finally the vowel shortening rule does not apply and there is a noticeable high off-glide: free [friy] and bee [biy]. If [i] is followed by a different vowel, then the two sounds are separated by a noticeable high off-glide: reinforce [riyɛnfɔrs], reorganize [riyɔrgənayz]

Variations occur in Canadian speech when [i] occurs before [r]. In words such as fear (see appendix) the majority of speakers do not have a y-glide following the vowel, although some have both variants, one with [iyɹ] and the other with [ir]. This seems to indicate that whatever rule inserts the y-glide after a tense vowel applies optionally before an /r/ for a small number of speakers and for the majority it is blocked. Speakers who have the y-glide pronounce the final /r/ as a syllabic, i.e. as [r̩].

In words which have two morphemes such as skier (see appendix) most speakers have a high off-glide and a final /r/ pronounced as a syllabic. This is the reverse of what happens within a morpheme for the majority of speakers and seems to indicate that glide-insertion and syllabic /r/ formation rules are obligatory across a morpheme boundary, but for some speakers are optional elsewhere too.

An example of a derivation is:

Glide insertion (optional)	/rir/	/rir/	/skir/	/skir/
	y	-	y	-
Syllabic r formation	ɾ	-	ɾ	-
	[riyɾ]	[rir]	[skiyɾ]	[skir]

Glide insertion seems to work essentially the same for Australians as it does for Canadians, except before /r/. In this latter case the glide insertion is obligatory and the final /r/ is converted to a ə.

Subjectively speaking Australian speakers characteristically sound "flat". My hypothesis is that this is a result of a lowering and backing of this high front tense vowel [i], which I indicate with [ɨ].

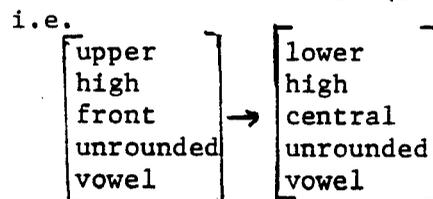
The following pronunciations are possible in Australian spoken English:

	[i, iy]	[ɨ, ɨy]
read	riyd	rɨyd
reef	rif	rɨf
relieve	rəliyv	rɨliyv
release	rəlis	rɨlɨs
free	friy	fɨɨy
bee	biy	bɨy
reorganize	riyɔgənayz	rɨyɔgənayz
reinforce	riyənɸɔs	rɨyənɸɔs
reality	riyələtɨy	rɨyəlɨtɨy
fear	fiyɘ	fɨyɘ
beer	biyɘ	bɨyɘ
tier	tiyɘ	tɨyɘ
tear	tiyɘ	tɨyɘ
here	hiyɘ	hɨyɘ
hear	hiyɘ	hɨyɘ
ear	iyɘ	ɨyɘ
skier	skiyɘ	skɨyɘ
sightseer	saytsiyɘ	saytsɨyɘ
dear	diyɘ	dɨyɘ
gear	giyɘ	gɨyɘ
rear	riyɘ	rɨyɘ
wierd	wiyɘd	wɨyɘd
tiered	tiyɘd	tɨyɘd

For Australian and Canadian speakers the phoneme /i/ may be realized as [i] or [iy], depending on the environments as already noted. In addition Australian speakers have another rule which they may optionally apply to lower the vowel [i]:

Australian Lowering

i ---> ɨ (everywhere)



The actual application of this vowel lowering rule in speech seems to be determined by the particular social situation if the situation is more formal, you do not apply the rule. That is, the lowered vowel is regarded by some as a less prestigious form. The reason for this may be a hangover from convict and

colonial days when position and power were linked with the British Standard pronunciation. The present writer is typical of many Australians. While both options are possible for me, I don't usually apply the vowel-lowering rule.

An example of alternative derivations is:

	/rɪr/	/rɪr/
Vowel lowering (optional)	ɪ	-
Glide insertion	y [rɪyə]	y [rɪyə]

In summary, one of the many differences between Australian and Canadian English is the presence of the vowel lowering rule in Australian English and its absence in Canadian English.

APPENDIX

Classroom Survey of the Phonetic Realisation of /ɪ/ for Canadian Speakers.

	ɪr	ɪr	both
fear	1	most	2
beer	0	1	most
tier	most	0	2
tear	0	most	1
hear	1	most	2
here	1	most	3
ear	1	most	2
dear		most	1
gear	2	most	1
rear	1	3	1
wierd		most	3
skier	most	1	
sightseer	most	1	