

Say “æ” BCL Pre-Nasal /æ/ in British Columbia English

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There are two features of /æ/ in British Columbia (BC) English that are widely attested in the literature: it is undergoing retraction and lowering and it is sensitive to the influence of certain following consonants. Pappas and Jeffrey (2013) posited that the retraction and lowering of /æ/ remains an active change, with older male speakers still lagging a generation behind. Despite this trend toward general lowering, Swan (2015) found /æ/ to be raised in pre-velar conditions while lower than expected before a nasal consonant, contrary to Boberg’s (2008) finding that /æ/ was raised in both contexts. The present research seeks to examine the realization of /æ/ in apparent time to determine whether the pre-nasal /æ/ is in a process of lowering and further if it is descending at a comparable rate to /æ/ in other environments.

In this study, 66 participants (36 female and 30 male) who had spent at least a decade in British Columbia before age eighteen were asked to read a short news article and a word list. The speakers were between the ages of 13 and 62, with a mean age of 31. There is a correlation between speaker age and vowel height for /æ/ generally, as well as before nasal segments. However, this correlation is insignificant for the pre-velar context. The results suggest the pre- nasal /æ/, as suggested by the literature, is lowering with the general phoneme. However, pre- velar /æ/ does not appear to be meaningfully affected by the retraction and lowering of /æ/. The implication of these findings is that pre-velar /æ/ may be a categorically distinct allophone while the pre-nasal variant is likely continuous with the other instances.