

# A GOVERNMENT-PHONOLOGICAL SKETCH OF VOWEL LAXING IN LAURENTIAN FRENCH

The present paper sketches a Government-Phonological analysis of vowel laxing in Laurentian French (LF). This new analysis challenges previously held views couched in either lexical phonology (e.g. Poliquin, 2006) or various other linear models (e.g. Dumas, 1981; Reighard, 1986) by questioning what I call the *traditional view* which holds that the feature  $[\pm \text{tense}]$  is what distinguishes two separate pairs of vowel series ( $[i \ y \ u]$  vs.  $[\text{ɪ} \ \text{ʏ} \ \text{ʊ}]$ ;  $[e \ \text{ø} \ \text{o}]$  vs.  $[\text{ɛ} \ \text{œ} \ \text{ɔ}]$ ). The discussion also touches on a wider theoretical issue, as of yet unresolved: the relationship between  $[\pm \text{tense}]$  and  $[\pm \text{ATR}]$ .

LF vowels have been at the centre of much of the literature concerning Quebec linguistics. Indeed, a debate arose in the 1980's when researchers disagreed on how to characterise the apparent four degrees of height in the vowel system. What is clear is that a simple binary system of  $[\pm \text{high}]$  and  $[\pm \text{low}]$  features is inadequate for characterising 4 degrees of height (ruled out by the nonsensical feature pairing  $*[\text{+high} \text{+low}]$ ).

Some opted for an n-ary system where each degree of height is represented by a unique feature (e.g. 1high, 2high, 3high, 4high) (e.g. McLaughlin, 1986). Apart from the distaste many researchers have against n-ary features, this solution fails to account for many newer English borrowings. Others, not wanting to abandon binarity, augmented the height divisions with the help of the  $[\pm \text{tense}]$  feature (Dumas, 1981). This, however, raises some questions, among which is explaining why the mid tense vowels behave differently from the high tense vowels with respect to various phonological processes such as vowel harmony. Also, tenseness is phonemic in mid vowels yet is non-contrastive in high vowels.

From a conceptual view, the pair of phonological features  $[\pm \text{tense}]$  and  $[\pm \text{ATR}]$  presents a unique problem in phonological theory in that they appear to be describing the same (or a very similar) event in the vocal tract. Indeed, some authors go so far as to conflate these two features (both in general and with respect to LF), claiming that the former is merely an intuitive descriptive label, while the latter is a more technical term with physiological correlates (Poliquin, 2006). On the other hand, some authors maintain that these represent two distinct articulatory features. For instance, the feature  $[\pm \text{tense}]$  describes an activity taking place in the mouth whereby the front of the tongue is moved either closer or further from its central resting place. The feature  $[\pm \text{ATR}]$  is relegated to an activity in the pharynx whereby the root of the tongue either retracts or advances, hence the label Advanced Tongue Root. The problem, however, is the apparent lack of naturally occurring languages wherein both features  $[\pm \text{tense}]$  and  $[\pm \text{ATR}]$  are contrastive with each other.

With the desire to shed light on the Tense/ATR distinction, this paper presents an analysis of LF vowels couched in Government Phonology (Kaye, Lowenstamm, & Vergnaud, 1990; henceforth GP). I explore the potential that this framework has in order to deal with the many complexities of the LF vowel system, including the complex distribution of tense and lax vowels.

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