

The short-*a* system of New York City English: An update

The short-*a* system in New York City English (NYCE) has been characterized as a phonemic split conditioned by following phonological environment and by various lexical constraints. In addition, NYCE speakers may raise the tense and ingliding /æ/ so that *bad* and *beard* are homophones for /r/-less speakers (Cohen, 1970; Labov, 1966). Recent work on this complex system does not come to a consensus regarding its current status. Labov (2007) and Labov, Ash & Boberg (2006) assert that the system remains intact in NYCE speakers. In contrast, Becker & Coggshall (2008) find that younger white New York City natives are no longer producing the split found in older generations. The present study analyzes the NYCE short-*a* system, with a view to establishing its current status.

This paper looks at the system among native speakers of NYCE, both those who are white and those who are members of ethnic minorities. Literature on linguistic transmission and diffusion has utilized the complexity of American English short-*a* to inform our understanding of these processes. Payne (1980) finds that native English-speaking children with non-Philadelphian parents did not always acquire the complex Philadelphian short-*a* pattern in its entirety, and Labov (2007) shows that the diffusion of the NYCE short-*a* system across different US speech communities often results in a weakening of the original pattern. Further, while the general assumption that ethnic minorities do not produce regional dialect features has been contested (Fought 1999; Wolfram, 2007), there is evidence that minority speakers do not display the split short-*a* patterns found in the mid-Atlantic states (Labov, 1966, Henderson, 1992; Labov, 1994; Lee, 2000; Friesner & Dinkin, 2006). Recent studies on NYCE showed that neither New York born Chinese (Wong, 2007) nor young African American New Yorkers (Becker and Coggshall, 2008) exhibit the “classic” NYCE short-*a* split. Rather, they tend to exhibit the nasal system, with tensing of /æ/ only before nasal consonants in both open and closed syllables, common in many varieties of American English (Labov, Ash & Boberg, 2006).

Specifically, this paper reports on data taken from sociolinguistic interviews with thirty native New Yorkers: sixteen whites, four Latinos, four Asian Americans and four African Americans. Acoustic measurements are done instrumentally in Praat and Plotnik, while ANOVA establishes the short-*a* phonemic patterns between and within ethnic groups. The study breaks down speakers according to whether or not they have the split system and, among those who do, multivariate analyses in Goldvarb further characterize the phonological and lexical conditions for the tensing and raising of /æ/. Given the salience of short-*a* tensing as a feature of NYCE, this study is significant both in its report on the current state of the short-*a* system and in its examination of the extent to which members of NYC's ethnic minorities are—and are not—participating in the acquisition and maintenance of NYCE features.

References

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