Language Change and Variation

Edited by Ralph W. Fasold
and Deborah Schiffrin

LANGUAGE CHANGE AND VARIATION

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RALPH W. FASOLD and DEBORAH SCHIFFRIN
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PREFACE

The study of language variation in social context continues to hold the attention of a large number of linguists. One focus for this research is the annual series of NWAVE colloquia held at various North American universities. This volume is a selected collection of articles based on the papers presented at NWAVE XI held at Georgetown University in 1982.

This collection appears well after NWAVE XI where the research was presented. The explanation (though perhaps not excuse) for the delay is a combination of the usual problems that arise from a volume representing the work of a number of authors, an almost incredible sequence of bad fortune, and (it must be admitted) a certain degree of poor management on the part of the senior editor. Yet, because there has been no consistent, systematic outlet for studies on language variation and change, the work these articles represent has, by and large, not been superseded in the published literature. Many of the articles that appear here serve as a foundation for the current work of their authors and others. For these reasons, we believe this collection is an important one, despite the delay.

The articles deal with a number of themes, some of which have often been discussed, and others that have been less emphasized. The first group of articles in the volume center on a frequent theme: speech communities as the essential setting for understanding variation in language. Earlier work in linguistic variation dealt for the most part with phonological variation and change. The next two sections move the discussion to syntactic and morphological change and variation in syntax. A selection on the role of variation in understanding first language acquisition comprises three papers. As the study of language variation matures, it is essential that continuous refinements be made in its empirical methodology, and it is inevitable that differences in opinion on theoretical issues will arise. The articles in the last section concern theoretical controversy and methodological advances.

Several individuals were immensely helpful during the preparation of this volume. No one deserves our appreciation more than Carolyn Nocella, who carefully retyped the entire manuscript onto magnetic disks from

very problematic hard copy, making further editing and camera-ready copy preparation with computer assistance possible. Eleanor Waters and especially Sophia Behrens spent painstaking hours copy-editing the manuscript during some of the difficult periods in its history. The editors are grateful to several Georgetown University Linguistics Department Fellows for help with proof-reading, correspondence, graphics and in other ways: Alexandra Casimir-Smorciewski, Catherine Strine, Belle Tyndall and Esther Figueroa. We very much appreciate the work and patience of Anne Porcelijn in supervising this project for the publisher and the encouragement of Prof. E. F. K. Koerner, the series editor.

We found it exciting to assemble these fine studies and we hope and expect that the volume will be a valuable addition to the literature on sociolinguistic variation and change.

R.F.
D.S.

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Ralph W. Fasold and Deborah Schiffrin (eds)

Language Change and Variation

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EXACT DESCRIPTION OF THE SPEECH COMMUNITY:
SHORT A IN PHILADELPHIA

WILLIAM LABOV
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract.
     A fundamental issue in linguistic theory is whether
the object of linguistic description concerns the biolog-
ical properties of its speakers or the community that
uses language for communication and social interaction.
The patterns of variation and change in short *a* in Phila-
delphia are used to address this issue. More than 6,000
tokens from the speech of 100 speakers provide a basis
for the most detailed description of the Philadelphia
short *a* system yet available. The analysis also suggests
that the most profound linguistic regularities are to be
found only in the speech community.

1. The object of linguistic description.
     One of the central problems of linguistic theory is
to locate the object of linguistic description[1]. There
is general agreement that language is an instrument of
communication that depends jointly on an underlying
physiological system and a system of social control. The
question is where to find the most systematic view of the
linguistic system--in the individual who carries the ge-
netic mechanism, or in the community that exerts the
stimulus and control.
     Both individuals and communities show surface fluc-
tuations in the data. Individuals show variation in
their speech and contradictions in their judgements of
acceptability; communities show even wider variation
across social groups and social contexts. In both cases,
we hope to extract the general principles of linguistic
change and structure from these fluctuations. But there
is disagreement about which kinds of data will give us
the best chance of success--reports of individuals or
surveys of the speech community.
     This paper presents the case for the study of the
speech community through an exact description of the most

complex feature of the Philadelphia dialect: the lexical split of historical short *a* into tense /æ/ and lax /æh/.

The speech community has been defined as an aggregate of speakers who share a set of norms for the interpretation of language, as reflected in their treatment of linguistic variables: patterns of social stratification, style shifting, and subjective evaluations. This orderly heterogeneity normally rests on a uniform structural base: the underlying phrase structure, the grammatical categories, the inventory of phonemes, and the distribution of that inventory in the lexicon. Previous studies have described the behavior of the variable elements of the Philadelphia system (Labov 1980, Hindle 1980, Labov et al. 1982). This analysis deals with the structural base. Because Philadelphia is surrounded by communities with a wide variety of short *a* systems, the exact description of this distribution will provide one of the defining features of membership in the Philadelphia speech community.

In the view supported here, the English language is a property of the English speech community, which is in turn composed of many nested subcommunities. There is no doubt that Philadelphian speakers of English are members of the larger community of American English speakers, and the even larger community of all speakers of English. It might also be said that Philadelphia is in turn composed of many smaller subcommunities. But the data presented here show that the linguistic world is not indefinitely complicated.

The phonological pattern of the short *a* split, which uniquely defines Philadelphia as a linguistic unit, is uniform across social classes, ethnic groups, and family and friendship networks[2].

This uniformity will not appear to someone who approaches the community with a list of words in hand. As we will see, word lists and formal elicitations are the primary sources of confusion in our descriptions of language. They have produced the illusion that the linguistic community is an aggregate of individuals with an unlimited number of different systems in their heads. When we study what people do, rather than what they think they do, we get a simpler and more understandable view of the linguistic system.

2. Short *a* and lexical split.

The tensing and raising of short *a* is part of a longstanding drift that has affected West Germanic for over a thousand years: the lengthening and raising of low vowels.

. The first Old English vowel change in this series was the raising of long *a* in *sta:n*, *ba:t*, etc., to a mid back position, yielding modern *stone* and *boat*.

. Throughout the Old English period there was extensive raising of long /æ:/ to /e:/, varying according to the dialect area.

. A new source of long /a:/ appeared in the tenth to twelfth centuries with the lengthening of short /a/ in open syllables (*grave*, *name*); these new long vowels were fronted and raised, and later diphthongized modern /ey/.

. A new source of long *a* then appeared in borrowings from French (*France*, *dance*); in London, these fell together with the results of lengthening of short *a* in closed syllables before /s/, /f/, and /θ/ to yield the current-day 'broad a' class of Received Pronunciation with irregular parallels in many other dialects.

. In many American dialects, short open *o* words were irregularly lengthened before /s/, /f/, /θ/, and /n/, and raised variously to lower mid, upper mid, or high position in *loss*, *cough*, *cloth* and *strong*.

. In almost all American dialects, the remaining short *a* words have been affected by lengthening and raising. In the Northern dialect area west of New England, all /æ/ words are affected; in New England, it is generally limited to all words where a nasal consonant follows /æ/; in the Southern states, a lexical split involves three possibilities: lax [æ], tense ingliding [e:ə], and upgliding [æ[i]]. The Middle Atlantic states show a two-way opposition of tense and lax that is the subject of the account to follow.

If Philadelphia were the only dialect of English, the descrip-tion of /æ/ and /æh/ would be simply a list of the dictionary entries. But an intelligible account of the Philadelphia dialect must include an understanding of where it has come from and where it is going, along with its relation to other dialects. This is done through the concept of short *a* as an 'historical word class.' It is defined as the group of words that contains the reflexes or descendants of Middle English short

a, which in turn inherited Old English short *a* and the corresponding elements of the Scandinavian and Romance parts of the Middle English vocabulary. Through the past five centuries, it has undergone many fluctuations in its phonetic realization, back and forth from [æ] to [a] several times, up to [ɛ] and back to [æ]. After whole-sale losses by lengthening in open syllables, various dialects have lost occasional members by compensatory lengthening (*palm*), raising (*catch*), backing (*watch*, *walrus*), and migration to broad *a* as previously noted. New members have been gained through loan words (*algebra*, *Chopin*), and recaptured by spelling pronunciation (*salve*, *falcon*). The great majority of words have remained as intact members of the short *a* class, jointly defined by phonemic opposition to other historical classes.

The phenomenon I am about to describe is a cata-strophic phonological event, shattering short *a* into phonemes /æ/ and /æh/ with about equal representation in the lexicon. The tensed and lengthened group absorbs the earlier marginal /æh/[3] and reconstitutes it as a major element of the phonological system.

The Middle Atlantic split has been the subject of linguistic reports for eight decades (New York: Babbitt 1896, Hubbell 1950, Labov 1966, Cohen 1970; Northern New Jersey: Trager 1930, 1934, 1940: Philadelphia: Ferguson 1975, Labov, Yeager, and Steiner 1972, Payne 1980, Labov 1981a). The split is one of the most complex phonologi-cal distributions known from a geographic, social, and linguistic standpoint. The New York pattern shows the largest number of environments for the tense vowel; there is a steady decrease as we move south toward Philadelphia and Baltimore. New York City shows raising of short *a* before all voiced stops, voiceless fricatives, and front nasals; in Philadelphia before front voiceless fricatives and front nasals. In New York City, the tense vowel is the subject of intense social concern; in Philadelphia, there is a more moderate reaction and correction, chiefly among the middle class.

A sharp distinction must be made between the selec-tion of words for membership in the tense or lax groups, and the raising of the tense vowel to high peripheral position (Labov, Yeager, and Steiner 172:70-72). Phila-delphia is more advanced than New York in this raising process, but more limited in the selection of words. In

both cities, the phonetic position of the tense vowel is the main focus of social attention, while the actual distribution of tense and lax forms is not a matter of social concern at all. The phonetic raising is a regular, Neogrammarian sound change, while the tense/lax division shows grammatical and lexical conditioning (Labov 1981b).

The phonological conditioning of the tense/lax alternation first suggested a complex rule, but it is now clear that it is a lexical split, with distinct dictionary entries for lax /æ/ and tense /æh/. Labov 1981a sums up the evidence for this position on the Philadelphia split:

. There are stable lexical distributions that cannot be predicated by any phonological or grammatical rule.
. While children born out of Philadelphia acquire the phonetic patterns of the Philadelphia dialect in a few years, only children of Philadelphia-born parents show a consistent short *a* distribution.
. Children from New York City use a lexical strategy in acquiring the Philadelphia pattern, while children from areas outside the Middle Atlantic states use a rule-governed phonetic strategy.
. Middle Atlantic speakers show more categorical discrimination of the [æ] - [e:$^{\ominus}$] continuum than speakers from a one-phoneme area.

Ferguson 1975 described the Philadelphia short *a* distribution on the basis of observations of his own speech, word lists supplied by four graduate students, and informal observations in the city from 1940 to 1969. He outlined most features of the system: tensing before front nasals and front voiceless fricatives followed by consonants or inflectional boundaries; tensing before the three affective adjectives *mad/bad/glad*; the exceptionally lax classes of weak words and irregular verbs before nasals; lax treatment of abbreviations like *math*; and lax exceptions for learnéd words.

Ferguson also pointed out the similarity of the environments for the tensing of short *a* and broad *a*, and outlined a hypothesis for the historical evolution of the pattern from this nucleus of most favorable environments. He indicated the importance of short *a* tensing for an understanding of long-term drift, and called for additional

investigations with more sophisticated methods. He was
not confident, however, that his methods had allowed him
to describe the Philadelphia speech community. He
prefaced his description with the following reservation:

> The variety of Philadelphia English described
> here seems quite widespread in the metropolitan
> area, but other varieties also exist. The va-
> rieties seem to share a large part of this
> short *a* system, but further investigation would
> be necessary for any firm statement on them.
> (1975:260)

This is the only feature of Ferguson's account that
is contradicted in the report to follow. The system he
set out to describe is uniform throughout the white com-
munity. It is a part of the homogeneous structural base
that defines the Philadelphia speech community.

3.   The database and methods of analysis.

The description of the Philadelphia short *a* pattern
is based on a total record of short *a* words found in in-
terviews with 100 speakers from the neighborhood studies
of the Linguistic Change and Variation (LCV) project
(Labov 1980, Labov et al. 1982).

3.1   The sample. The neighborhood, age, and ethnic
distribution of the speakers are shown in Table 1.
Neighborhoods show strong concentrations of ethnic
groups: Irish in Kensington, Poles and Germans in
Fishtown and Richmond, Irish and Italians in the South-
east, Italians in the South Central Area, Jews in Over-
brook, Irish and English in King of Prussia. The neigh-
borhoods also represent a wide range of social class con-
centrations. The speakers from Kensington, Port Rich-
mond, and Fishtown are from the middle range of the work-
ing class, with representation from dock workers, truck
drivers, and other semiskilled occupations. Southeast,
and South Central Philadelphia have a strong concentra-
tion of upper working-class subjects: draftsmen, foremen,
bank tellers, machinists, etc. Overbrook can be consid-
ered a fairly solid grouping of lower middle-class
speakers, and the King of Prussia development includes
both lower and upper middle class, with many heads of
families employed in electronic, chemical, and computer
industries (for more details on social class, see Labov
et al. 1982).

	Fish-town	Kensing-ton	South-central	South-east	Over-brook	King of Prussia	Total
				Sex			
	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F
Age							
8-13	2/1	2/2	2/2	3/3			9/8
14-20	4/1	1/1	5/9	2/0		1/1	13/12
21-30	2/1	1/1	0/2	1/3	0/1	0/1	4/9
31-40		1/0	0/1	0/2	3/3	1/1	5/7
41-50			2/1			4/3	6/4
51-60		1/0	1/2		3/3	1/2	6/6
61-	1/0	3/1	1/2	2/1			7/4
Total	9/3	9/5	11/18	8/9	6/7	7/8	50/50
Ethnicity							
Italian		1	21	3			25
Irish	4	12	4	7	2	3	32
Jewish		1	2	3	10	1	17
Polish	6						6
German	2			3		2	7
Wasp						9	9
Other			2	1	2		5

Table 1.   Social distribution of the short *a* sample.

The upper half of Table 1 also shows the sex distribution across neighborhoods and age groups. Females are over represented in the 31-40 age range, and under represented in 41-50, but otherwise the sample is fairly well balanced in this respect.

3.2   The ratings. All short *a* words were classified under the two categories TENSE and LAX. Two intermediate categories were recognized in the original ratings: 80 LAX? and 45 TENSE? tokens were recorded. Since these represent only 2.0% of the 6,233 tokens, they are set aside here, and only the 6,108 tokens rated clearly LAX or TENSE will be considered.

It is important at this point to address the question of how much confidence can be put in these clearly impressionistic ratings. For this purpose, we can make use of Hindle's instrumental analysis of the speech of
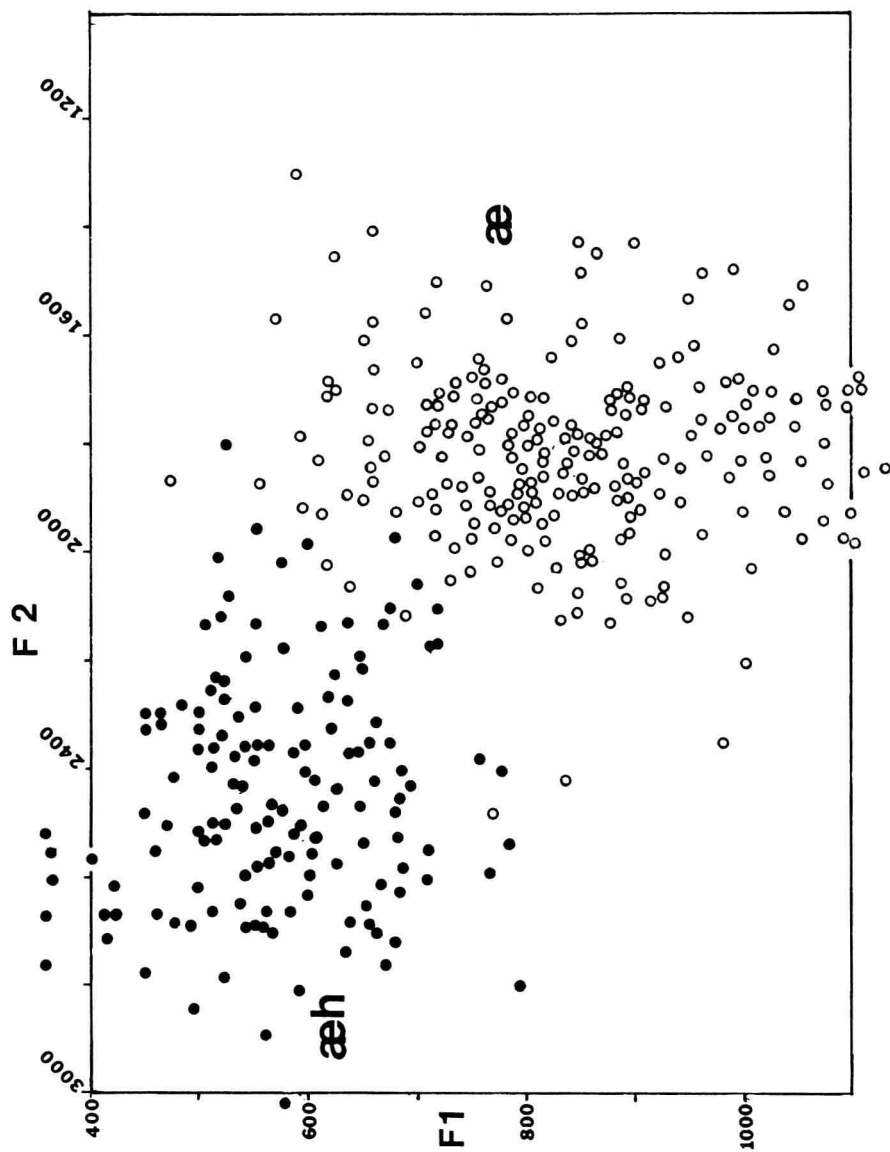
Figure 1. Instrumental measurements of vowel nuclei.