Transmission of Philadelphia short-a tensing: the changing gravity of “planets”

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This sociolinguistic study of preschool-aged children and their parents addresses the questions and predictions posed in the literature on Philadelphia short-a tensing. Quantitative methods are employed to closely study transmission within families and to report on the present status of tensing environments previously identified as changes in progress. Based on Labov (1989) and Roberts and Labov (1995), the projected results for 2008 in South Philadelphia would be increased short-a tensing before /l/ and before intervocalic nasals. Surprisingly, however, while tensing before /l/ has progressed, tensing before intervocalic nasals has not (Fig. 1), instead peaking at one word: planet (Fig. 2). Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that the crystallization of planet halted advancement in this environment rather than opening the gate to diffusion. Preschool-aged children are often under-represented in sociolinguistic studies due to the challenges they present, including recording enough data, developing age-appropriate elicitations, and measuring high formants. Roberts and Labov (1995) first asked how preschoolers acquire variables undergoing change in progress and found that overall they had accurately acquired the short-a pattern. Data from the three families in this study (Alex 4;4 and mother Angela, Corina 4;11 and mother Cristina, Delilah 4;4, Daniel 3;3 and parents Diana and David) showed the children indeed acquired the two short-a categories. Each of the three families’ distributions are distinct, however, so a complex picture of the acquisition of changing variables emerges. For the change in progress of tensing before /l/, the child acquired full tensing if the parent fully tensed, variable or categorical tensing if the parent tensed variably, and variable tensing if the parent had no tensing. The results raise questions about the nature and scope of overregularization as well as the age at which the social force of speech communities can influence individuals to increment changes.

Figure 1. Short-a tensing before /l/ and before intervocalic nasals over time (planet excluded)

Figure 2. Tensing of planet over time

References
Roberts, Julie. 1994 Acquisition of variable rules: (-t,d) deletion and (ing) production in preschool children. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.