Transmission or diffusion?: NYC-like short a in Southeast Florida and the Hudson Valley

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In New York City (NYC), /æ/ is split into distinct tense and lax phonemes. Various communities with ties to NYC have been found to exhibit one-phoneme /æ/ systems whose allophonic alternation resembles NYC’s biphonemic system; Labov (2007) argues that this allophony is the result of diffusion of NYC’s phonological constraints on /æ/-tensing into single-phoneme communities. This paper sets out to provide a more complete description of the diffused /æ/ pattern through additional data from the Hudson Valley region, and compares it to data from southeastern Florida, where NYC-like /æ/ had been observed anecdotally.

The Hudson Valley data corroborate Labov’s findings, in that tense and lax /æ/ are allophones of a single phoneme. Examination of the phonology of this system shows that diffusion not only eliminates nonphonological constraints on tensing but streamlines the phonological constraints as well.

The Florida speakers with NYC-like /æ/ do not share this pattern. Instead, they maintain the phonemic split between tense and lax categories. These speakers exhibit substantial overlap between tense and lax clusters, in a pattern similar to what Becker & Wong (to appear) found among younger NYC speakers. At least one speaker who exhibits this pattern has no family members from the NYC area. Whereas the diffused Hudson Valley system results from contact between local adults and NYC speakers, as described by Labov, the pattern found in southeastern Florida must be the result of transmission by children of NYC speakers (cf. Johnson 2007). This pattern seems to be exhibited in Florida primarily by Jews, about 50% of whose population migrated from the NYC area (Sheskin 1991).

This paper therefore both provides deeper insight into the constraints on diffusion of dialect features and demonstrates circumstances under which a phonemic split can nevertheless be effectively transmitted to new communities.

References