Take the A-train - and then don’t!

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Short /æ/ in Copenhagen Danish has two basic allophones in more or less complementary distribution, a front [æ], and a back [ɑ].

During the latter half of the 19th century, the front [æ] was split into two socially determined variants, a raised variant, [ε], and the original [æ]. The [ε] was typically associated with male working class speech but the variant spread, and around 1970 seemed to be victorious in Copenhagen in general: In Normann Jørgensen’s study (1980) we find [ε] percentages ranging from 60 to 90+ and the middle class informants were catching up. The raising process seemed to be approaching completion. However, in a study of 31 native Copenhageners, Holmberg (1991) showed that the [ε] no longer was correlated with class. But also that it was no longer the dominant variant, the raising process had apparently been reversed. In 2005 we repeated the 1991 study in a panel study of language change in real time involving 24 of the original informants. The [ε] percentages are still low (around 14 for the whole sample) in the re-recordings, but once again a class difference emerges: the middle class men are in the lead! Furthermore, the use of [ε] in real time has changed significantly for around a fourth of the informants. From a raising process racing towards completion, the [ε] variant now seems to be free for all kinds of uses.

The discussion will seek methodological and theoretical explanations for these findings, involving the historical nature of the old and well known variant of [ε] compared to other vowel variables, the possible divergence between methods, and the change that Copenhagen as a speech community has undergone in the period studied.

References
Gregersen, Frans, Maegaard, Marie and Pharao, Nicolai, forthc.: ”The long and short of A variation In Danish.” Acta Linguistica Hafniensia 41: Gregersen (ed.): Language Change in Real Time.