

Lexical diffusion in the loss of the /a/ - /ɑ/ distinction in Parisian French?

In this study we aim at finding out whether or not lexical diffusion seems to be involved in the process of loss of distinction between /a/ and /ɑ/ (*patte-pâte*) in Parisian French. Phonetically gradual sound change ought to be lexically regular according to the classification of Labov (1994). Nevertheless, some studies have observed lexical diffusion processes within phonetically gradual sound change (Yaeger-Dror 1996, Krishnamurti 1998, Hansen 2001), which is intriguing for the standard model of sound change. Opponents, however, claim that these latter examples can always be explained by some phonetic constraints and as such do not represent examples of genuine lexical diffusion. As such, the controversy has not reached a solution. (See overview Joseph and Janda 2003).

Since French has delivered possible examples of the kind of paradoxical sound change mentioned before (Fagan 1987, Hansen 2001), it seems obvious to continue the search for examples within French. In the light of the existence of a large amount of real time data (1972-74 vs. 2001-2004) from Paris (Hansen & Juillard, forthcoming) it was therefore decided to look upon the loss of distinction between /a/ and /ɑ/, one of the reported on-going changes in Parisian French.

In Martinet's (1969) overview of the successive studies of Martinet (1945), Reichstein (1960) and Deyhime (1967a, b) it has been clearly stated that the distinction between a/ and /ɑ/ is gradually disappearing for Parisian speakers (more so than for Northern French speakers in general). Though some retention of the distinction has been observed at the extremes of Parisian society (*la haute bourgeoisie*, Mettas 1973; lower class multiethnic suburbs, Jamin 2007), the overall impression is still one of continuing weakening of the opposition (Lennig 1978, Yaguello 1991, cited by Coveney 2001:94). The tested word pairs in the Hansen & Juillard (forthcoming) study (*mal-mâle, patte-pâte, salle-sale, débats-des bas, rats-ras, état-des tas, écrasées-encrassé, passion-passions, épaté-pâtée*) confirm this: Whereas 31% of the total amount of pairs read by the 12 speakers were distinguished in 1972-74, only 23% were distinguished by twelve comparable speakers in 2001-2004. In the entire reading material from this corpus (68 sentences and two little texts), which includes numerous other contexts for /A/, it turned out subsequently that the dominating variants were [a] or a slightly posterior variant, [a̠], [a̠] appearing very rarely. Our preliminary study of the lexical distribution of the remaining [a]'s show curious results in many respects: Some residue effects are visible ([a̠] in words like *pas, bas, ras, tas*) but other expected similar effects are absent, for instance the circumflex words *pâte, âne, mâle* now only display [a], and new effects seem to have been created (there are overwhelmingly many [a]s in words like *froid, rois, trois* that did not have this pronunciation before). Further analysis of these data, and inclusion of spoken data from the same time span, will hopefully help us clarify the mechanism of this sound change and its correspondence to the existing competing models.

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