

The Romance of Short-a in Philadelphia

Bill Labov

University of Pennsylvania

Since Ferguson 1975, linguists have drawn theoretical profit from the intricate arrangements and re-arrangements of the choice between tense and lax forms of short-a in Philadelphia. We search for an explanation of the fact that *ran*, *swam*, and *began* are unique exceptions to tensing in closed nasal syllables, and are intrigued at the thought that the answer may be found in the eighth century A.D. Advocates of lexical diffusion are delighted when the least likely phonetic form, *planet*, is selected as a sole exception to the rule that dictates a lax vowel in open syllables. Functionalists struggle with the consequence of recent sound changes that prevent Philadelphians from distinguishing *owl* from *Al*. Our most recent adventure in this sea of phonolexical challenges is the effort to discover how and why vast chunks of the Philadelphia population have abandoned this intricate history in favor of the sweeping generality of the nasal system. To do so, they must follow instructions that turn tense into lax and lax into tense, and so they do, in one subcategory after another, displaying a phonological genius that we never suspected them to have.