

Transmission or Diffusion?

NYC-like short *a* in Southeast Florida and the Hudson Valley

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Labov (2007) defines difference between **transmission** and **diffusion** of dialect features:

- **Transmission** is the ordinary process of first-language acquisition: children acquire the dialect features of their parents, peers, and community; dialect contact may influence transmission in a dialectally diverse community
- **Diffusion** is borrowing of dialect features as a result of contact between **adults** from different speech communities

In **transmission**, children can faithfully acquire marked or complex dialect features; in **diffusion**, they are **simplified** due to adults’ reduced language-learning capacity.

- ^a Preston (2008): in communities to which the Northern Cities Shift has diffused, the vowel system has more phonological symmetry than in communities where it originated.
- Labov (2007): in communities to which the **New York City /æ/ system** has diffused, intricately conditioned phonemic split simplifies to a **regular phonological rule**: northern NJ, Albany NY, Cincinnati, New Orleans

New York City /æ/ system:

p	t	č	k
b	d	ǰ	g
m	n		ŋ
f	θ	s	ʃ
v	ð	z	ʒ
	l	r	

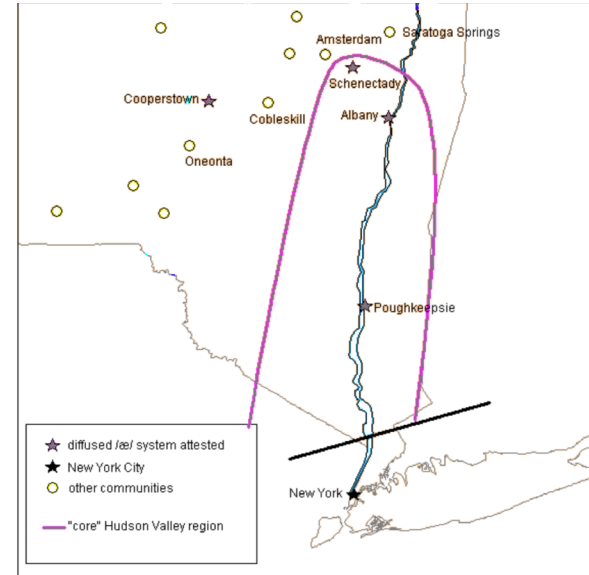
Phonemic split into “tense” /æh/ and “lax” /æ/, with semi-regular distribution:

- /æh/ usually appears before voiced stops, voiceless fricatives, and nonvelar nasals; /æ/ appears elsewhere. **However:**
- In an **open syllable**, /æ/ appears even before tensing consonants (*planet, habit*)...
 - **unless** the key consonant is followed by a morpheme boundary: so *planet* is lax but *planning* is tense.
- **Function words** are usually lax (*and, auxiliary can, had*)
- **Lexical exceptions** exist.

Labov (2007): result of **diffusion** of NYC /æ/ system is **regular phonological rule**: /æ/ is always tensed before the tensing consonants, notwithstanding syllable structure, morpheme boundaries, or function word status; there are no lexical exceptions.

Data from 120 speakers in **Upstate New York** (Dinkin to appear) finds 5 roughly matching expected “diffused system” pattern: 3 from Poughkeepsie, 1 from Schenectady, 1 from Cooperstown.

Poughkeepsie, Schenectady, & Albany define **Hudson Valley core** region; the Cooperstown speaker’s parents were from the Hudson Valley core as well. (Cooperstown seemingly undergoing new dialect formation; cf. Trudgill et al. 2000)



Southeastern New York State, showing the “Hudson Valley core” dialect region.

Speakers of diffused system **lack tensing before /g/**:

Thus the process of diffusion makes the tensing rule **more phonologically streamlined** by treating velar stops the same as velar nasals; the result of diffusion is not only more phonologically **predictable** but also more **structurally symmetrical** (cf. Preston 2008)

Speakers of diffused system typically have several **exceptions** to expected pattern; this suggests interpreting diffused system as exhibiting **variable** tensing

- Variability is a plausible outcome of diffusion; can be statistically examined
- Syllable structure has no significant effect on tensing, as expected
- Obstruent-liquid clusters (as in *class, graduate*) disfavor tensing: phonetic tendency in NYC system becomes phonological disfavoring factor in diffused system
- Careful styles favor tensing: reversal of expected NYC pattern

South Florida (SoFL) a dialectological dilemma (“marginal South” or “Southeast super-region,” but Doernberg & Cerny (2008) argue against even SE super-region)



Short-*a* data from ANAE (2006) show no NYC influence (nasal and/or continuous pattern), but pilot survey results suggest NYC influence
 Data from SoFL speakers who are associated with Jewish ethnicity show **NYC influence**
 SoFL pattern looks **different from Hudson Valley Core pattern**

- /g/ and /ŋ/ do not behave uniformly
- The syllable constraint is intact (lax /æ/ in open syllables)
- The function word constraint is intact (lax /æ/ in *can, and, had*)
- The two categories nonetheless exhibit quite a bit of overlap in phonetic space

These suggest that the system in Florida is still biphonemic, despite overlap of tokens and potential movement in the direction of merger.

Speakers look like **young white NYC speakers** discussed in Becker & Wong (to appear)

- A case of normal **transmission**
- Pattern argued to be the result of later contact with non-NYC speakers, leaving the underlying grammar intact

“Transmission” in SoFL, because

- Over 50% of Florida Jewish population has NYC origin (Sheskin 1991)
- History of segregation of Jews in SoFL
- Predominant linguistic pattern in childhood peer group is NYC pattern (similar to findings of Johnson 2007 at RI-MA border)

Results suggest a **typology of NYC-influenced short-*a* patterns**

NYC-diffused one-phoneme system

- Cincinnati (Boberg & Strassel 2000, Labov 2007)
- New Orleans (Labov 2007)
- Northern New Jersey (Labov 2007)
- **Hudson Valley Core** (this study) including Albany (Labov 2007)

NYC two-phoneme system transmitted but affected by contact

- Young speakers in NYC (Becker & Wong to appear)
- **Southeast Florida** (this study)

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