Sound changes and variation in the Viennese Dialect

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Introduction

Around 1900, a process which came to be known as the Viennese monophthongization started. In this process, the diphthongs /aE/ and /AO/ were monophthongized, especially in the lower social classes (Gartner 1900, Luick 1904). Especially the monophthongization of the diphthong /aE/, which changed into an open, palatal vowel, caused substantial changes to the other palatal vowels /i/, /e/, and /E/. By the addition of a further palatal vowel, the palatal chain became overcrowded – too many constriction degrees having to be distinguished phonologically.

As a first reaction to this change, the vowel /i/ evaded the problem by being articulated on the pre-palatal constriction location. Kranzmayer (1953), not having modern analysis tools at his disposal, auditively described the articulation of the new /i/ as more closed. However, by shifting the /i/ to a more front position, the three remaining /e/-vowels could share the palatal constriction location.

Approximately 20 years after the initiation of the Viennese monophthongization, Kranzmayer (1953) observed a further change, which he named the Viennese /e/-confusion. The /e/-confusion took place in the whole Middle-Bavarian dialect region. /e/ and /E/ were confused, and speakers started to be unable to choose the "right" form. However, in Vienna, maybe due to Czech influence, all /e/ and /E/ merged to /E/, rendering, for both *Segen* 'blessing' and *sehen* 'to see' the form [sEN]. However, this observation did not result in a change; in the Seventies, Seidelmann (1971) observed that speakers again used both /e/ and /E/. This way, *Fetzen* 'shred' could be pronounced either as [fetsn] or as [fEtsn], the tendency, however, going to [e].

Today, some 90 years later, still no stability can be observed in the realization of the vowels /e/ and /E/. However, the variability is not arbitrary, but speaker-specific.

Method

Nine speakers of the Viennese dialect have been asked to speak spontaneously, read sentences, and to name pictures. For the current investigation, the picture naming task has been analysed. The vowels /i/, /e/, and /E/ have been analyzed using STx (http://kfs.oeaw.ac.at). F1, F2, and F3 have been extracted by means of Linear Predictive Coding (46 ms window length, 95% overlap), rendering, in dependence of the length of the vowel, 30 to 150 measuring points for each vowel.

Results

Two strategies are observable: one set of speakers uses both /e/ and /E/, the others use only /e/. Note, however, that for speakers who chose the strategy of distinguishing only one e-vowel, the quality is definitely [e] and not, as observed by Kranzmayer (1953), [E].

Realizing only one e-quality, allows for the possibility of shifting the vowel /i/ from the pre-palatal constriction location, which is acoustically instable (Moosmüller 2007) back to the palatal location. This can only hold for speakers who do not distinguish /e/ and /E/. Two out of nine speakers show a tendency to shift the vowel /i/ to the palatal location.

Whether this change will take place, and whether the e-vowels will finally merge, will have to be observed in the upcoming decades.