Sound change across generations:
evidence from North Russia [1]

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Sound change may be particularly hard to analyze as historical sources fail to capture the diversity of oral speech. One way to address this issue is to expand the scope of traditional diachronic research and to investigate variation across current generations of speakers as the crucial vector of historical change.

The focus of the study is ongoing sound change observed through variation across several generations of speakers. Until recently there has been a consensus in the literature that a large number of Russian regional dialects, namely North Russian, systematically discriminate low and mid vowels in unstressed syllables (1a), as opposed to South Russian dialects and Standard Russian, where the neutralization of these phonemes in unstressed positions is obligatory (1b).

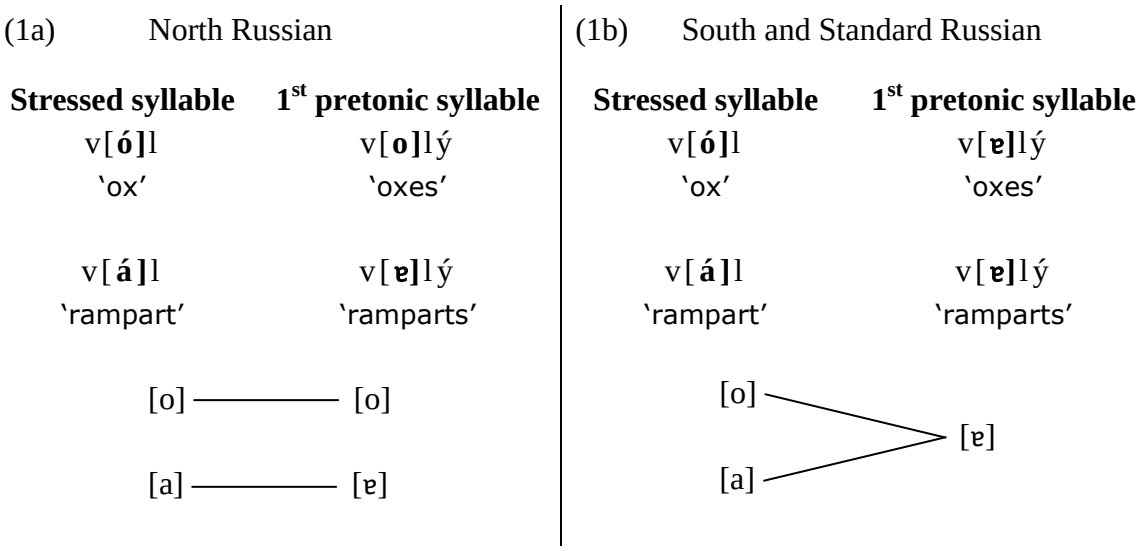

Figure 1. Discrimination vs. neutralization of low and mid unstressed vowels in Russian (cf. Avanesov & Bromlej 1986)

Recent fieldwork in one of the North Russian rural communities[2] has shown however that the discrimination model may hold only for some of the older speakers whereas in the majority of idiolects, particularly within middle and younger generation, we find numerous instances of vowel neutralization. One example is the neutralization of low and mid vowels, /a/ and /o/, in unstressed syllables. With respect to the spread of the neutralization of the two phonemes the idiolects recorded in the community fall into three clearly contrasted types which I conventionally call A, B and C. Figure 2 presents allophonic variation in the first pretonic (note that each position allows more than one choice).

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[2] The data were recorded in 2006 in the neighbouring villages of Safonovo and Elkino, the district of Mezen, Archangel Region, together with professor Christian Sappok of the University of Bochum.

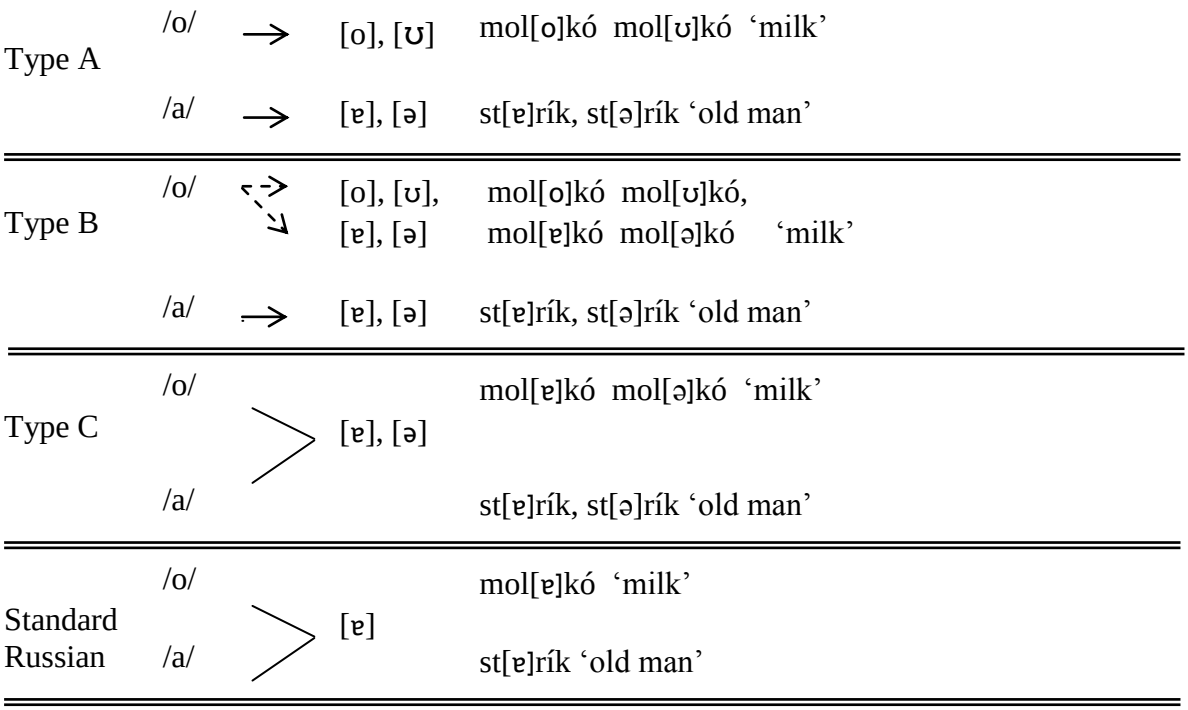

Figure 2. Allophonic variation of /o/ and /a/ in the dialect and in Standard Russian (first pretonic syllables after non-palatalised consonants)

The three types of the idiolects present three successive stages of the sound change which results in the loss phonological distinction between /o/ and /a/ in unstressed syllables. Type A consistently discriminates between low and mid phonemes in unstressed syllables and is found in idiolects of some of the older speakers. The opposite of this is Type C found in the speech of the middle and younger generation with /o/ and /a/ systematically neutralized in [ɐ] or [ə]. Multiple choices in type B, typical for the majority of the older speakers of the dialect, reveal a competition of the discrimination and neutralization pattern found in A and C accordingly.

The study shows that the dialect in question is moving from a system where the neutralization of low and mid vowels was absent or sporadic to a system with obligatory neutralization. This change may be captured using synchronic variation across several current generations of speakers. The analysis presents the evidence for the relative stability of the labialisation contrast as compared to the height contrast (Flemming 2008) as well as for the fact that phonological contrasts (such as labialization) can be preserved despite extreme decrease in duration (cf. Barnes 2006: 42).

References

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