Phonology and variationist sociolinguistics: The case of the Danish (a)s

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Section I

STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS

The quest for constancy

- From allophones to phonemes: the conscious reduction of variation

- Quote from Eli Fischer-Jørgensen: *Trends in Phonological Theory*: 23

- Strongly influenced by Saussure the Prague School established phonological opposition as the fundamental concept upon which the other definitions were to be based. The PHONOLOGICAL OPPOSITION is described as a difference of sound which in a given language may serve to distinguish intellectual meanings[3].

- Note 3: The purpose of the term 'intellectual' is to restrict meanings to those which belong to the linguistic content communicated; in this way sound differences which characterize the speaker as belonging to a certain group or which express feelings are eliminated.

Grønnum 'scratching the surface'

- Three (a) immediate phonemes:
- [æ], [a] and [ɑ]
- BUT: "A Praguian structuralist would perhaps be less quick to dismiss word-final [ɑ] as /ar/. He would note that in distinct speech there are actually only three stressed occurrences [vɑ, pɑ, kɑ] *var, par, kar 'was, pair, vessel'*. Those apart, and when no /r/ precedes (which always yields [ɑ]), [a] and [ɑ] are in complementary distribution:..." (Grønnum 1996:19)

A special problem

- The contrast between
- bad! imperative of 'bade' *to bathe*
- transcribed as [bæd']
- and
- bad preterite of 'bede' *prayed*
- transcribed as [bad']
- vowel shortening and stylistical possibilities

Basbøll's solution

- Three levels:
- phonetic
- phonemic
- and
- morphophonemic
- At the phonetic level there are [æ:], [a],[ɑ(:)]
- At the phonemic level this is /a/ and /ɑ/
- At the morphophonemic level this is |a| and |ar|

PHONOLOGY AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Labov on the linguistic variable

From: 'The social motivation of a sound change'

[…]what are the most useful properties of a linguistic variable to serve as the focus for the study of a speech community. First we want an item that is frequent, which occurs so often in the course of undirected natural conversation that its behaviour can be charted from unstructured contexts and brief interviews. **Secondly, it should be structural**: the more the item is integrated into a larger system of functioning units, the greater will be the intrinsic linguistic interest of our study. Third, the distribution of the feature should be highly stratified: that is our preliminary explorations should suggest an asymmetric distribution over a wide range of age levels or other ordered strata of society. (p. 7f)

THE PROBLEM STATED

- What kind of structural embedding is relevant for the sociolinguistic variable?
- To be more specific:

- Which of the potential allophones of the Copenhagen spoken Danish /a/ phoneme (or the |a| morphophoneme) may be designated sociolinguistic variables?
- And how do they participate in change in real time?

Section 4

A LITTLE HISTORY

In the beginning

- …there was just one (a) quality

- and that was probably [ɑ(:))]

The splits: long and short and the internal split of the short (a)

- Around 1850 long (a:) becomes higher and more front: [æ:]

- Around 1888 a higher variant of (a), [a] is found also in the short (a) before a (j) in words like 'mig' (*me*), 'dig' (*you*), 'sig' ((*your)self*)

- Around 1930 Otto Jespersen states the rule of complementary distribution for the short (a) variants:

- AN [a] is found before alveolar consonants and nil

- AM [ɑ] is found before labials and velars

The final split of the short (a)s

- 4 main variants of short (a) may be distinguished:
- AN (before alveolars and nil) is found in two variants: AN1 [ɛ] and AN2 [æ]. There is agreement in the literature that the AN1 was, or is, a characteristic of the Working Class (WC), in particular the males
- AM (before labials and velars) is also found in two variants: AM3 [a] and AM4 [ɑ]. In the literature there is agreement that the AM4 was, or is, characteristic of the WC, in particular the males
- What does the present day evidence say?

The Copenhagen data set

- 42 informants in total:

- 24 in generation 1 (born 1944-62) interviewed first time in 1986-88 (Study 1 (S1), second time in 2006-08 (S2), 6 in each cell: Middle Class (MC), Working Class (WC), males (m) and females (f)

- 18 in generation 2 (born 1963-73); 4 in the two WC groups and 5 in the two MC groups

Section 5

RESULTS: THE BACK VARIANTS

First approximation

- AM4, i.e. the marked, supposedly WC variant in the entire data set at the LANCHART Centre, i.e. including much more than Copenhagen informants

- There are **110** instances of AM4 in the entire corpus

- and **12.468** instances of AM3

AM4 instances in Copenhagen

Generation 1 in S1:

- WC informants: 27
- MC informants: 1

TOTAL: 28

Generation 2 in S1:

- WC informants: 2
- MC informants: 5

TOTAL   7

Generation 1 in S2:

- WC informants: 11
- MC informants: 2

                              13

Generation 2 in S2:

- WC informants: 3
- MC informants: 1

                               4

Not a social variant but an individual feature!

- **The AM4 has all but disappeared in the speech community!**

- It seems to be characteristic that very few individuals have produced an extreme proportion of the sum total of AM4s

- In the Odder data set, for example, **only two persons** have an AM4 at all. One has one instance while the other one has **13** in the S1 and **5** in the S2.

- Of all the 19 AM4s in the Odder recordings, one person has produced 18!

Conclusion: a change has happened

- Starting in the 1850s or later, but at least around 1888, the original value of the (a) was raised. The result may be seen now: AM3 is more fronted than the original quality of AM4.

- The old quality of the (a), the AM4, has disappeared as a social feature

- **AM4 is now a feature of specific individuals and thus no longer a social marker with an attached stereotype; it no longer functions as a sociolinguistic variant**

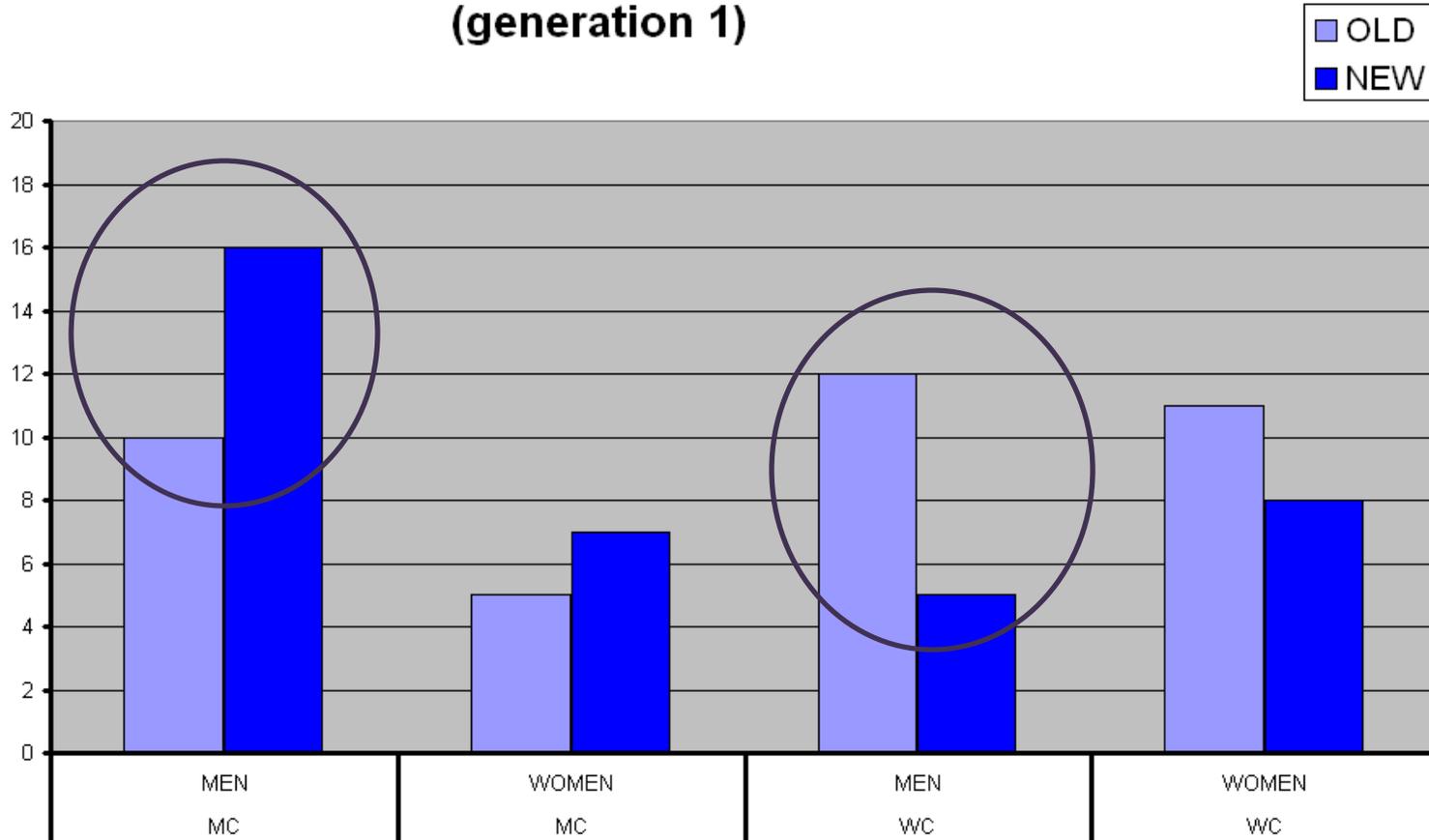# SECOND EXAMPLE: THE AN VARIABLE: STABLE VARIATION

The real time data: nothing happened - apparently

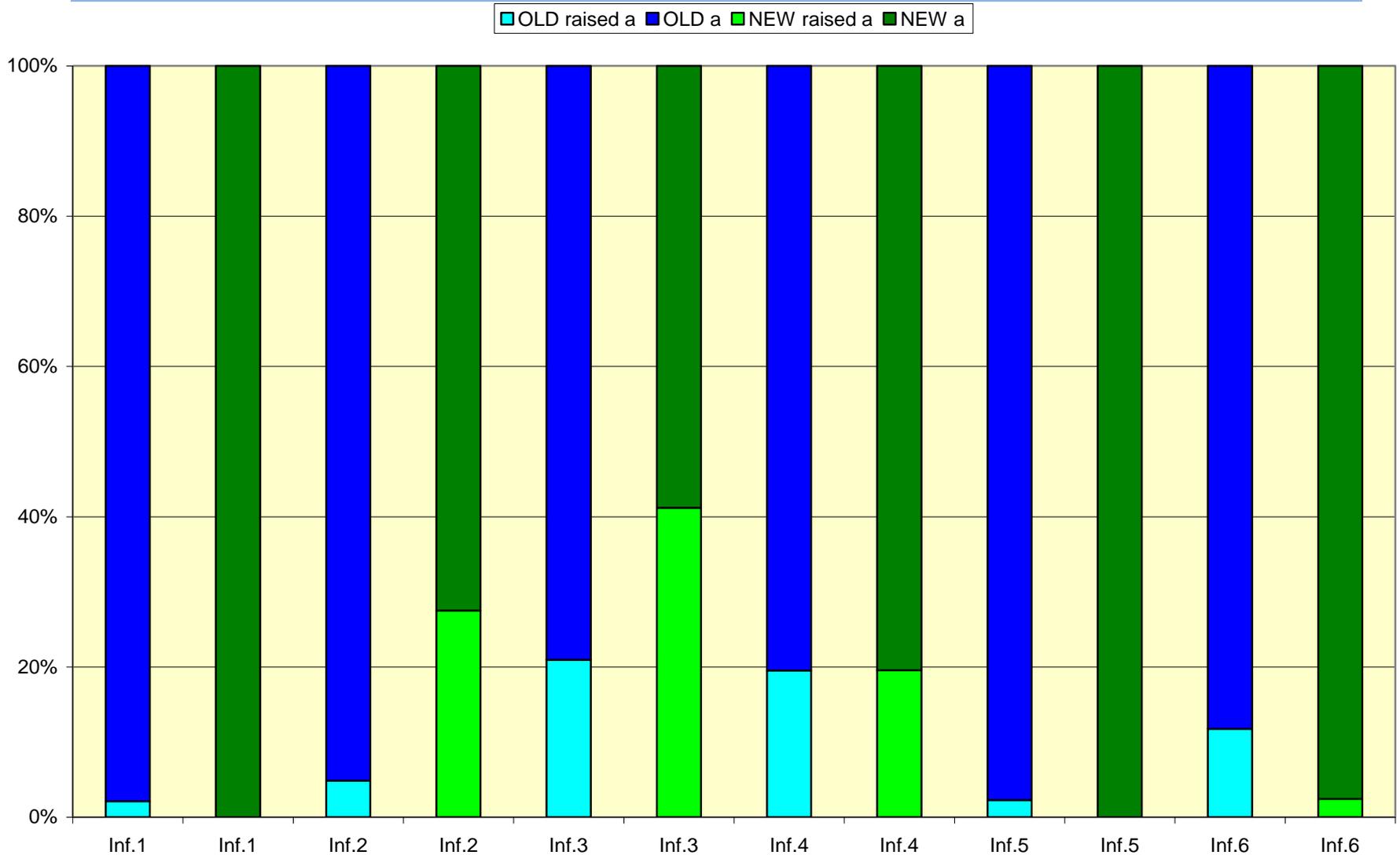# The real time picture of short (a) 1986 vs 2006
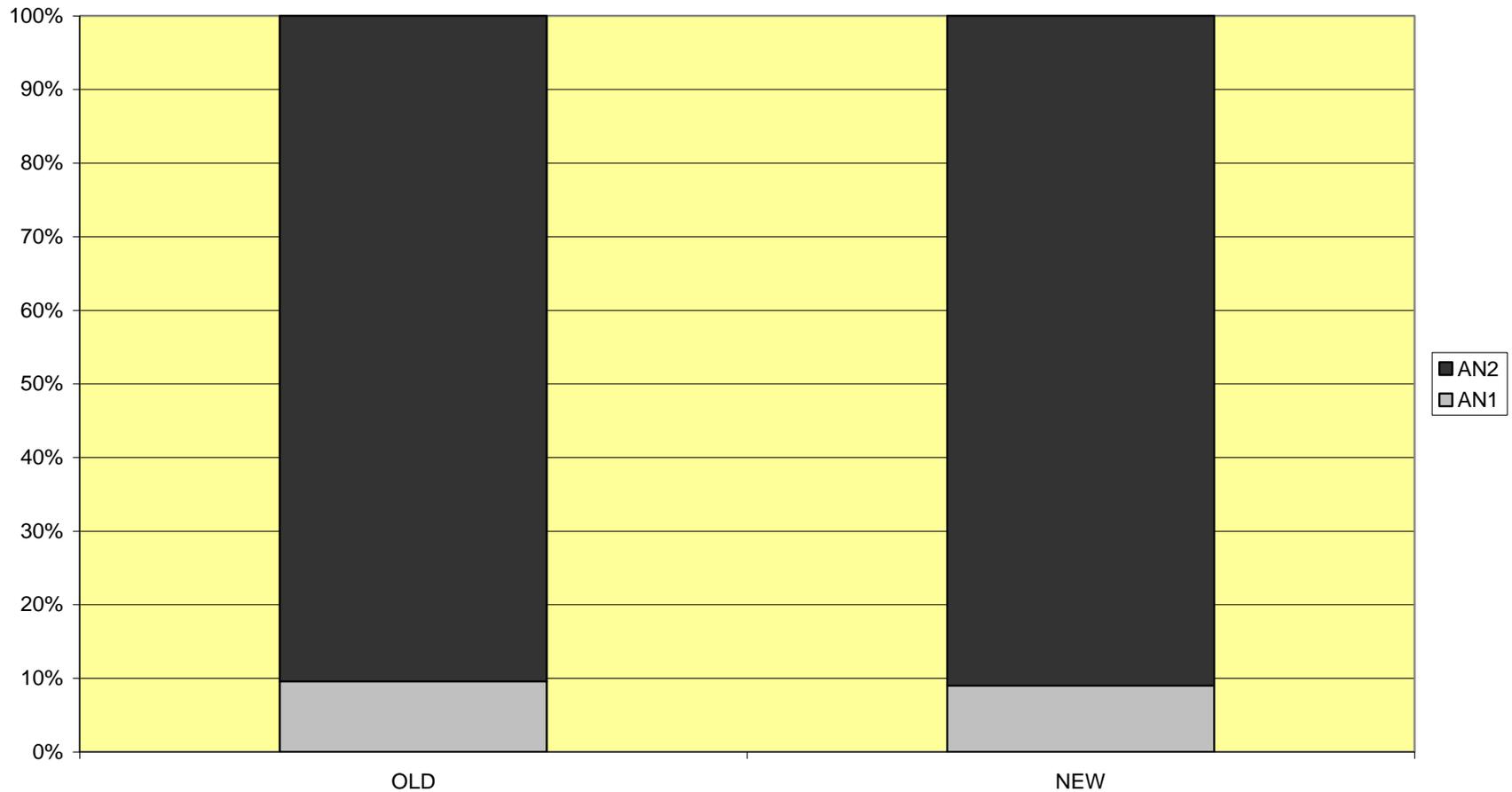
BUT: Real time change at the group level

The percentage of raised /a/ in the Copenhagen data (generation 1)

The MC men in real time: 3 types

Conclusion

- The front short (a), the AN variable, still has two variants, AN1 and AN2; there are **1018** instances of AN1 in the entire corpus against **12.244** AN2s

- But the pattern of use to-day has been reversed: 3 of the 6 MC men in generation 1 have a significant proportion of AN1s whereas the WC men have diminished their use of it!

- **Most importantly: The AN variants still function as sociolinguistic variants both of them.**

Final conclusion

One of the allophones of the /a/ behaved differently than the other. This seems to be solid evidence that in the speech community of Copenhagen the 'structurally irrelevant' allophones have **some** psychological reality.

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- www.lanchart.dk

- www.dgcss.dk

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