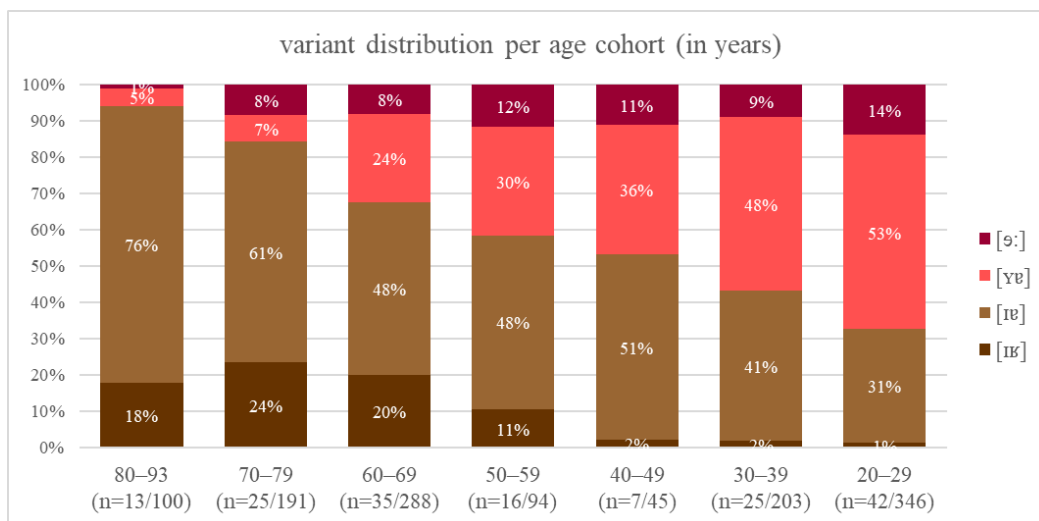


Sound Change and Allophony in Northern High German: The Sociophonetics of the /ɪ/ + /r/ Sequence

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In spoken Northern High German, the sequence /ɪ/ + /r/ (as in *irgendwo* ‘somewhere’ or *Kirche* ‘church’) is traditionally described as being realized synchronously with unrounded [ɪ] followed by either (1) a voiced uvular fricative [ʁ], resulting in [ɪʁ] ([ɪʁ]gendwo, K[ɪʁ]che), or (2) a vocalized /r/ as [ɪʁ̥] ([ɪʁ̥]gendwo, K[ɪʁ̥]che) (Duden 2023: 54). Recently, however, two additional variants have emerged in the northern German region (Kleiner 2011ff.; Elmentaler&Rosenberg 2015: 155–167; Conrad, in press): (3) a rounded variant of /ɪ/ before vocalized /r/ as [ʏʁ̥] ([ʏʁ̥]gendwo, K[ʏʁ̥]che), and (4) a long, central, unrounded monophthong [ə:] ([ə:]gendwo, K[ə:]che).

A sociophonetic analysis of n=1.295 tokens from n=168 speakers in five northern German cities (Bremerhaven, Celle, Cuxhaven, Hanover, and Hildesheim) revealed a significant generational decrease in the use of the unrounded variants (1) and (2) (82 > 63 > 36 percent across the older/middle/younger generation), as well as a significant increase in the use of variant (3) with younger age (11 < 28 < 50 percent). The [ə:] variant is also spreading slowly (7 < 8 < 13 percent). According to the apparent-time hypothesis, these generational differences can be interpreted as a sound change in progress, with /r/ playing a key role as a conditioning context.



The acoustic analysis of formant trajectories illustrates that [ə:] represents the final step in a multi-stage development, with each stage traceable in the linguistic data: [ɪʁ] > [ɪʁ̥] > [ʏʁ̥] > [ə:] (Petersen 2024; Conrad, in press). After the vocalization of [ʁ] in the combination /ɪʁ/ to form the diphthong [ɪʁ̥], the unrounded [ɪ] is rounded to [ʏ] in the context before tautosyllabic /r/, resulting in [ʏʁ̥]. Through reciprocal assimilation, the two diphthong components [ʏ] and [ʁ̥] gradually converge, ultimately merging—at least for some younger northern German speakers—into the long, central, unrounded monophthong [ə:]. In the final step, rounding is abandoned in favor of a simpler articulation (neutral lip and tongue position).

This presentation will detail the sociophonetic and acoustic analyses and discuss the implications of this sound change for the vowel system of Standard German. Notably, variants (3) and (4) have been increasingly observed even in the speech of trained Standard German speakers, such as news anchors on *Tagesschau* (Conrad, in press), indicating that this change is spreading “upward” within the vertical spectrum of German varieties.

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