

Labov says, “for reasons that are not entirely clear, it is not easy for students of the speech community to locate the ongoing creation of phonemic distinctions” (1994:331). Mergers have been reported far more often than splits in the sociolinguistics literature leading to “the odd conclusion that most languages are steadily reducing their vowel inventory” (Ibid.). Clearly this is not what happens.

In this presentation, I propose that the resolution of this puzzle lies in investigating variation and change in a wider range of contact settings. If it is true that contact can facilitate the development of splits, then the lack of observed splits could be due to the traditional monolingual orientation of variationist sociolinguistics (Meyerhoff and Nagy 2008). While lexical borrowing is one well-known mechanism through which sound inventories can expand, an under-researched mechanism is phonological interference from a dominant language to a minority language. I will discuss a case study of phonological interference in Toronto Heritage Cantonese.

The data comes from the HerLD Corpus (Nagy 2011), which includes hour-long sociolinguistic interviews from speakers of several heritage languages spoken within various immigrant communities in the Toronto area. The analysis focuses on formant measurements of 15 tokens for 5 vowels in 2 phonetic contexts from each of 17 speakers of Cantonese for a grand total of 1,275 tokens. Results from mixed effects modeling show the innovation of 3 phonetically conditioned splits among second-generation speakers (early bilingual speakers of both English and Cantonese). For example, second-generation speakers are splitting Cantonese /i/ into two distinct vowels, likely under the influence of English, which has a phonemic contrast between two phonetically similar vowels (SEEK vs. SICK). Similar splits occur for Cantonese /ɛ/ and /ɔ/.

Overall, the results of this study show a promising avenue in future variationist research on contact-induced sound change.

**Word Count:** 299

## **References**

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