

Spreading of tonal accent in West Norwegian, categorical or gradual?

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The rural dialects surrounding the city of Bergen in Western Norway are known for lacking the tonal accent contrast that characterizes most Norwegian and Swedish dialects. This is no longer the case. Due to influence from the Bergen dialect, which has had the contrast as far back as we have sources, tonal accents started to appear in the speech of people from the area born around 1950. Based on phonetic analysis of data from sociolinguistic interviews with 31 speakers from a local community near Bergen, born between 1911 and 1995, I shall show how the appearance of tonal accent can be tracked in the speech of those born in the 1950s and 60s. The analysis will be supplemented by scripted recordings made of speakers of the same age group, but from several locations in the relevant area, made in 1970.

A question that arises here is whether this feature initially appears as more or less frequent occurrences that represent a fully-fledged, Bergen-like contrast, or whether the contrast develops gradually as a phonetic and initially hardly perceptible contrast. I shall show that the latter is the case, and that the full Bergen contrast only appears in speakers born in the 1990s. Unlike the previous generation, these have acquired the Bergen dialect more or less completely, while in their parents' speech, much more of the traditional dialects has been preserved, even if the tonal accents have made their appearance.

An important aspect of the paper will be methodology. Quantitative studies of tone based on natural speech, here in the shape of sociolinguistic recordings, are rare, probably due to the difficulties in controlling for structural and emotional factors influencing intonational patterns. But as I shall show in my presentation, a quantitative study of variable F₀-realization is indeed feasible with respect to the Norwegian and Swedish tonal accents, probably due to strong and quite stable constraints imposed by the accentual system on how a stressed syllable can be realized tonally in the two languages. This makes it possible to investigate variable patterns in the speakers who belong to the generation where the contrast starts to appear, especially whether there are structural constraints that characterize the change. Are for instance the predictable parts of the distribution acquired before the more lexicalized patterns?