

Disguised variation: the case of /e/ in Hungarian dialectology

Fruzsina S. Vargha

Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics (Budapest)

Standard Hungarian has a high and a low short front vowel, /i/ and /ɛ/, but most Hungarian dialects also have a mid /e/. Standard Hungarian and those dialects where there is no distinction between /ɛ/ and /e/ have a „one-e” system, and the dialects with /e/ vs. /ɛ/ distinction have a „two-e” system (Kontra–Vargha 2014). In the main resource of Hungarian dialect pronunciation, *The Atlas of Hungarian Dialects* (Deme–Imre: 1968–1977), the pronunciation of /ɛ/ is transcribed with great spatial variation (Vargha 2020: 454), but, to the contrary, the transcription of /e/ is phonetically homogenous. In his monograph about Hungarian dialects, Imre already states that the apparent lack of variation in the pronunciation of /e/ might be the consequence of a consistently erroneous transcription method of these vowels (Imre 1971: 272). While Atlas data are registered with a detailed phonetic transcription, /e/ is almost always transcribed as [e], as if the transcribers’ only aim were to merely indicate the phonemic distinction.

Data collection for the Atlas was made with paper and pencil (respondents’ answers were transcribed on the spot by the fieldworkers). However, one or two hours of interviews (mainly spontaneous speech data) were also recorded at 352 locations during 1960 and 1964. The usefulness of older recordings in dialectology and in the study of dialect change was demonstrated in several studies (e.g. Brissos 2014, Purnell 2013, Thomas 2017), and the acoustic analysis of the field recordings might lead to the verification of the transcribed atlas data. The quality of the Hungarian recordings is not always good enough, but in most cases, F1 and F2 are reliably measurable manually.

Formant measurements of /e/ and /ɛ/ are made at 30 locations and the results are compared to the vowel qualities deduced quantitatively from the atlas data. While the transcriptions of /ɛ/ are largely confirmed, normalized F1 and F2 values of /e/ and /ɛ/ also demonstrate a regional variation for the phonetic realization of both vowels. In western dialects, where /ɛ/ is realized more open (with higher F1 and lower F2), /e/ is typically more open as well. Thus /ɛ/ sounds of north-eastern dialects are acoustically nearly identical to western realizations of /e/.

The determination of exact vowel qualities and the comparison of F1 and F2 values of different vowels can contribute to a better understanding of historical vowel changes (merger of /ɛ/ and /e/ in today „one-e” systems), and might lead to predictions about the future of /e/ and /ɛ/ distinction in dialect areas where it is still maintained.