

# Please say A

“Flat a” in radio newscasts 1950-2010

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During the 20th century, the front allophones of the Danish short /a/ and long /a·/ phonemes are believed to have undergone quite a significant raising in informal language. This study examines raising of /a(·)/ in a corpus of radio news readings spanning more than 50 years.

In the paper it is shown how raising of /a(·)/ has been condemned in prescriptive literature as well as in public debate at least since the late 19th century. Prescription has been particularly hard on the use of raised /a(·)/ in the national radio, and here particularly within the news. The paper examines how the articulation of /a(·)/ in news readings have developed in the face of this hard prescriptivism.

It is found that the front allophones of both /a/ and /a·/ have raised quite remarkably in the period. In the 1950s front /a/ was a low-front vowel; today it is a mid-front vowel. The long front /a·/ has undergone a similar raising. The result of these raisings is that /a/ today has roughly the place of articulation that /a·/ had in the 1950s, whereas /a·/ has moved in on the /a(·)/ vowels, the next vowels up. It is concluded that prescriptivism has had a limited effect on these vocalic productions.

The paper discusses whether this means that the (previously?) condemned variant has “won”, and concludes that it depends on perspective: Acoustically it has, but this has not led to significant changes in the linguistic system. Sociolinguistically speaking, the raised /a(·)/’s seem to have lost much of their stigmatization, and they seem to be less discussed in public debates, presumably because articulations that were previously stigmatized are today considered to be within the norm.