Danish is remarkable in its richness of vowels, with four levels of height in both the front and back vowels, and phonemic vowel length. The mid-low unrounded vowels have received particular attention in Danish sociolinguistics (e.g. Brink & Lund 1975, Gregersen & Pedersen 1991, Macgaard et al. forthc.). Brink & Lund (1975) show that standard Danish at the beginning of the 19th century had only one pronunciation of the /a:/ and /a/ phonemes, [ɑ:]/[ɑ]. During the 19th century both /a:/ and /a/ split into [ɑ:]/[ɑ] before labials and velars and [æ:]/[æ], the variable (æ), in other contexts.

During the 20th century, pronunciation of (æ) acted as an important, and apparently very stable, shibboleth of Copenhagen urban dialects. The low-prestige dialect had further raising of the (æ) to [æ]. The variable has had a high degree of attention from language prescriptivists from Forchhammer (1898: 29) who describes the (æ)-raising as a Copenhagen feature (spelling Copenhagen "Københævn" instead of "København" in a poor attempt to mock the raised pronunciation), through Albeck (1942), to Skyum-Nielsen (2007: 24) who complains that written a's are often pronounced as æ's (phonetic [ɛ]) in younger peoples' speech.

In the context of this strong and century-old condemnation, it is interesting to study the pronunciation of the variable (æ) in a prestige and highly standardized variety. In this paper, I present analyses of the pronunciation in approx. 7 hours of radio news readings spanning more than half a century. Denmark had a radio monopoly until the 1980s and to this day, the news readings on the national radio stand as a yardstick for standard language pronunciation.

Formants were measured in four variables (æ:), (æ), (a) and (a:)(n=6000), and it is analyzed whether the (æ) is raised over time and whether, as hypothesized by Brink & Lund (1975), this leads to an acoustic overlap of (æ:) and (æ) as [æ:]/[æ]. The (a) is also analyzed to see whether it is stable or not and whether there is acoustic overlap of (a) and (æ:).

The results indicate that (æ) does indeed raise, in accordance with the observations by Brink & Lund (1975) and apparently against Labov et al.'s (1972: 106) second general principle of vowel shifts. However, no speaker has acoustic overlap of (æ) and (æ:). In the recordings from the 1950s, speakers have only one pronunciation of the /a/ phoneme, [ɑ], but two of the /a:/, namely [æ:] and [a:]. In the newer, they have two sets of short and long vowels [æ]/[æ] and [a]/[a].

This raises interesting questions for the theory of motivation in language change, viz. does condemnation inhibit innovation in the prestige style or not? And if it does not, as appears to be the case here, what does this mean to the social evaluation of the variants? Is the variable subject to stable variation (i.e. the raising is an indication of a style shift in the radio news) or is the threshold between standard and "substandard" pronunciation subject to constant re-negotiation?