Monophthongization and Diphthongization in Upper Saxon

The Upper Saxon dialects underwent both the Early New High German monophthongization and diphthongization processes (e.g., MHG zît > [tsaɪ̯t], MHG lieb > [liːb]). In this regard, they do not differ from present-day Standard German. However, within the broader landscape of High German dialects, this equivalence to the Standard positions Upper Saxon as particularly distinctive. To simplify: East Central German dialects with the Upper Saxon dialects correspond to the Standard while East Upper German dialects underwent only the diphthongization (MHG zît > [tsaɪ̯t], MHG lieb = [liəb]); West Central German dialects, roughly speaking, only participated in the monophthongization (MHG zît = [tsiːt], MHG lieb > [liːb]); while West Upper German dialects remained largely within the framework of the Middle High German system (MHG zît = [tsiːt], MHG lieb = [liəb]).

Despite sharing these historical developments with the modern German Standard, the system of monophthongs and diphthongs in the Upper Saxon dialects is nonetheless clearly distinct from Standard German. This is primarily due to the fact that the closing Middle High German diphthongs ei, ou, and öu have not been preserved as diphthongs, as is the case in most other dialects, but have instead undergone monophthongization to [eː] and [oː] (partially also [ɑː])—e.g., MHG fleisch > [fleːʃ].

Over the past hundred years, regional language developments in the central areas of the Upper Saxon dialect region are marked by both vertical and horizontal leveling processes and a substantial loss of traditional base dialects in favor of regional colloquial forms. These processes have led to a significant decline in the frequency of the mentioned monophthongized forms, even though they remain present to some extent.

As part of the IVaL project, we investigate the everyday language of animal keepers from Leipzig Zoo using recordings spanning the past 20 years. The main analytical focus is on the linguistic development of individual speakers for whom we have recordings covering large portions of this time span. In addition, the rest of the corpus comprises of recordings from approximately 200 other speakers and consists of well over 2.5 million phonetic segments. This extensive dataset allows us to form a comprehensive picture of regional language use.

In this talk, I will first outline the methodology we use to automatically distinguish monophthongs from diphthongs, given the sheer volume of data. I will then present preliminary findings based on the still-incomplete dataset: first, the overall distribution of monophthongs and diphthongs across the sample, and second, the individual developments of selected speakers over the 20-year period. Finally, I will address several factors that appear to influence speakers' choices in phonetic realization.