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Wat ast mat I? – Lowering of Middle High German (I) in the Bitburger German Dialect

Bitburger Platt, spoken in and around Bitburg, a German town near the Luxemburg border, exhibits a lowering of the Middle High German short (I). According to language atlases, this segment has the reflex [ɪ] or [i] in most modern German dialects (Veith, 1995: 241). However, the dialects of the entire northern Rhine River valley exhibit lowering to some degree, mostly to [ɛ] (mirrored in the neighboring Dutch and Flemish languages). As one progresses south from Cologne into the Eifel, [œ] and [ɔ] forms are found, and farther south still, [a] variants appear in the extreme west of the Rheinland-Pfalz province, as well as in Luxemburg.

Crucially, this degree of lowering can only occur if (I) is not followed by a palatal sound. Thus, the word *mit* 'with' is a candidate for lowering to [a] (Bitburg [mat]), but *mich* 'me' only lowers to [ej] (Bitburg [mejʃ]). Historically, at least, those modern reflexes of MHG (I) not lowered to [a] have been phonologically conditioned to remain in high or mid-vowel positions. My research has found the usage of [a] variants to be a very stark indicator of dialecticity, similar to the findings of Lenz' (2003) study of the nearby town of Wittlich.

This study draws on a corpus collected in Bitburg and nearby villages in the summer of 2010. With each participant, I conducted a recorded Labovian-style interview. In addition to the interview, each participant was asked to take part in a 15-minute conversation with another community insider, during which I was not present (similar to Stuart-Smith, 1999). This was intended to elicit vernacular speech. Analyzing 15-minute segments of each participant's interview and conversation, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What differences in frequency of lowered (I) variants exist between participants' *interview* and *conversational* speech?
2. Do differences correlate with participants' age and/or gender?
3. What differences in (I) exist between the palatal and non-palatal environments?

In the combined results of six participants analyzed thus far, most tokens of (I) in the palatal environment in the conversation were lowered, but – true to previous studies – never beyond [e] or [ej]. The non-palatal (I) variants in the conversation surfaced overwhelmingly as [a] when lowered. These preliminary results, expressed in percentages, are summarized in the table below:

Situation >	Interview (402 total tokens)		Conversation (370 total tokens)	
Environment >	Palatal (# = 214)	Non-palat. (188)	Palatal (175)	Non-palat. (195)
Lowering to [a]	0 %	7	0	68
Partial lowering	4	9	87	17
No lowering	96	84	13	15

While there is a clear preference for vowel lowering in conversational speech over interview speech, another dimension, age, shows a striking pattern: the younger speakers tend to favor functions words and other commonly used words for (I) > [a] lowering, while older speakers lower the vowels to [a] in a much wider variety of words. This generational shift, if it holds, may indicate a gradual loss of a major feature of this dialect in younger speakers.