Reconceptualizing phonologization from an individual difference perspective
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Efforts in the past decades to identify variation in speech have provided important insights into a range of potential precursors of widely attested cross-linguistic sound changes. Yet, the nature of phonologization remains largely a mystery, that is, how does a phonetic precursor actuate as sound change? While phonologization is broadly conceptualized as the transition from a stage where a community of individuals exhibiting some form of intrinsic phonetic variations (i.e. the aforementioned phonetic precursors) to a stage where individuals within the same community exhibit extrinsic (i.e. phonological) features of that particular contrast, it remains unclear how such a transition comes about. The broad theoretical goal of this talk is to argue for a reconceptualization of the notion of phonologization. I argue that the question of phonologization is better addressed by asking how the processing and production of speech and language might vary across individuals in such a way that individuals who exhibit unique perceptual and production strategies relative to the local community of practice may serve as innovators who can sustain the introduction of stable new phonetic variants. I will illustrate the revised model of phonologization with a few case studies from English and Cantonese.