

The idea of London as generator of linguistic change in Britain has long been an article of faith. Our paper reports Phase I of the first variationist study of London. This is an ESRC-funded project on the English of older adolescents and the elderly. We ask:

- i. What evidence is there that linguistic innovations start in London and spread out from there?
- ii. Does the high degree of multilingualism in London have any long-term impact on ‘mainstream’ English?
- iii. Is the (purported) use of a teenage ‘multiracial vernacular English’ a potential precursor of change in ‘mainstream’ English (i) beyond the teenage years and (ii) outside ethnically diverse networks?

The project examines two boroughs in London, one in the inner, the other in the outer city. They were chosen:

- i. to reflect a high proportion of non-‘Anglo’ inhabitants of immigrant descent (inner London) vs. a low proportion (outer)
- ii. to reflect a contrast between relatively closed networks (inner London: ethnic group and family based) and relatively open networks (outer London: geographical/social mobility, reflecting out-migration and greater prosperity).

The project combines insights from social network models with the claim that linguistic change in metropolitan communities is endogenous, while in peripheral communities it is exogenous, with changes being adopted from elsewhere.

Our previous acoustic analyses of the short monophthongs of two towns in south-east England demonstrate regional convergence. We also identified a wider set of vowel qualities as targets of levelling in the south-east region. Our supposition was that these originated in and were diffusing from London.

Our acoustic analyses suggest that working-class white Londoners born 1900–1940 have vowels matching earlier descriptions. These qualities are, of course, not the levelled ones noted in our studies of teenage speakers in the south-east.

We would expect the teenagers in the new project to show precisely these levelled qualities, with further progress along phonetic trajectories, reflecting the assumed status of London as innovatory as well as the passage of time. However, for all but two vowels, evidence contradicts this expectation. The patterns actually found are:

1. Reversal of 19th/20th century changes:
  - south-eastern diphthong shift ‘undone’
2. Reversal or non-adoption of late-20th century changes:
  - no fronting of FOOT and GOAT vowels
3. Maintenance of 19th/20th century change:
  - diphthong shift of MOUTH as monophthong [æ]
4. Entrenchment or increase of late-20th century changes:
  - further fronting of GOOSE
  - further backing of STRUT

Most speakers use these variably, and the variation is correlated with expected social factors (greater use by inner-London and non-Anglo groups). Outer London has fewer of these features, and correspondingly more of the ‘levelled’ features associated with the south-eastern towns we studied.

We argue that these mainly inner-London changes are endogenous, but only in the sense that they are generated within the speech community, where there are many L2 speakers. We cannot exclude language contact.

The mismatch between inner-London features and those of the south-east region has serious consequences for our view of regional dialect levelling in England.