

The levelling of dialects in Britain has received a substantial amount of attention in recent years, and has been reported in the accents of, amongst others, Newcastle, Derby (Docherty & Foulkes 1999), Hull, Reading, Milton Keynes (Kerswill & Williams 1999), Middlesbrough (Llamas 1999, 2000), Norwich (Trudgill 1999), and Birmingham (Mathisen 1999). The variety of English spoken in Liverpool, on the other hand, is frequently cited as one of the few exceptions to levelling (e.g. by Kerswill 2003) but, despite the relatively large body of literature on the variety (Knowles 1973, 1978, De Lyon 1983, Honeybone 2001, Sangster 2001) no systematic study of phonological variation and change in Scouse has ever been undertaken.

This paper investigates the extent to which Liverpool English can be said to be levelling, either because (i) its regional edges are being rubbed away, or (ii) new phonological features that are found elsewhere are becoming more frequent. To this end, I compare a newly created corpus of 55-65 year old speakers with data from 16 male and female adolescents. I compare 12 phonological variables across the two groups. Eight of these variables can be said to be typical regional features of Liverpool English (START-fronting, the NURSE-SQUARE merger, the use of a long vowel in BOOK, TH-fricative stopping, R-tapping, and the lenition of /t/ and /k/), whilst the remaining four can be considered the 'classic' levelling variables (TH-fronting, T-glottalling, L-vocalisation, and the labiodental-R).

The paper concludes by suggesting that, although there is evidence of dialect levelling in Liverpool, evidence of phonological divergence is stronger. For example, there is no evidence that features of lenition – the most salient regional markers - are decreasing, but rather that they are spreading throughout the lexicon and are now much less narrowly restricted in their domain of application. In addition, I show that male and female speakers are diverging in different ways, and neither group can be said to be 'more standard' than the other.