

A Preliminary Investigation of the Sociophonetics of Nottingham Adolescents

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Much recent and ongoing variationist sociolinguistic and sociophonetic research in the UK has focused on identifying and explaining patterns of variation and change (e.g. Kerswill 2003). Nottingham, a city that has so far been little-studied linguistically, is an ideal site for investigating variation and change, and testing claims about geographical diffusion and regional dialect levelling, as its location in the centre of the country means it is potentially susceptible to both northern and southern variants.

I present the results of a study of 12 Nottingham adolescents, the beginnings of a larger and more thorough piece of sociophonetic research in this location. Speakers from two areas of Nottingham have been sampled; a former council estate (WC area) and a suburban MC area. Three vocalic variables are included, namely, MOUTH, *happy* and *letter* (Wells 1982). Data are taken from the casual conversation sections of one-to-one sociolinguistic interviews.

Earlier linguistic accounts of Nottingham have revealed existence of a monophthongal variant of MOUTH (Ellis 1889 ; Orton & Tilling 1969-71), while more recent descriptions of the accents of cities in close proximity to Nottingham have given [a:] as a common realisation (Docherty & Foulkes 1999 ; Beal 2008). This coupled with spellings such as '*dahn*' for '*down*' in folk-linguistics texts describing a stereotypical Nottingham accent (e.g. Scollins & Titford 2000) suggests Nottingham lies in a traditionally monophthongal-MOUTH area. Accounts of MOUTH frequently show that traditional pronunciations, including monophthongal realisations, are being increasingly rejected in favour of the standard diphthong [aʊ] by younger speakers. (Cheshire et al. 1999 ; Stoddart et al. 1999 ; Beal 2008).

The *happy* vowel has traditionally been reported as patterning with the KIT lexical set, with phonetic realisation [ɪ] (e.g. Wells 1982). Descriptions of the Nottingham accent have indicated that the *happy* vowel in this area may be even more open than KIT approaching [ɛ] (Trudgill 1999 ; Wells 1982). However, accounts of *happy* have also noted a growing trend for the use of a closer, fronter vowel [i:] (Trudgill 1999 ; Wells 1982).

letter, though little studied in detail, has been noted as being typically realised as [ə] in non-rhotic accents (e.g. Wells 1982), although Beal (2008) gives [ɒ] as the 'local' realisation of *letter* in Sheffield.

My results reveal that a variant of *letter* heard to be lowered and retracted from schwa was present and, for this sample, was confined to the speech of female speakers, with female WC adolescents displaying highest use. Female WC adolescents were also the highest users of a hyper-lax variant of *happy*, heard to be more open than KIT. The perceived openness of both variants was confirmed by instrumental measurements. Female WC adolescents additionally showed highest use of monophthongal [a:] for MOUTH.

Male and female MC adolescents were surprisingly similar in their variant usage of these three variables, although overall, female MC adolescents were found to be the highest users of the 'standard' and/or incoming forms [aʊ], [i:] and [ə].

Attitudinal perceptions of accent and dialect features can often play a role in shaping variation. From informal discussion during the interviews about participants' opinions about

local and supralocal pronunciations and the speakers who use typically them, I found that female speakers explicitly expressed negativity towards the accent of the opposite social class, and its speakers, whereas the male speakers were less critical, and ultimately of the opinion that everyone around Nottingham spoke the same.

I propose that the high use of monophthongal MOUTH variants, and the use of hyper-lax *happy* and *letter* variants by WC female adolescents is their avoidance of being considered “posh”, and hypothesise that the resulting greater difference in variant usage between WC and MC female adolescents than their male counterparts is due to their increased negative evaluation of members of the opposite social class.

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