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Dialect levelling and geographical diffusion in British English

Paul Kerswill
University of Reading

Introduction: geographical diffusion vs. levelling

This chapter is an attempt to bring out general tendencies in the regional dialect levelling which, it is often claimed, is leading to the loss of localised features in urban and rural varieties of English in Britain, to be replaced with features found over a wider region. In particular, I consider two possible mechanisms behind these changes. The first is *geographical diffusion*, by which features spread out from a populous and economically and culturally dominant centre (Trudgill 1982b: 52–87; Britain 2002). The spread is wave-like, but modified by the likelihood that nearby towns and cities will adopt the feature before the more rural parts in between. At the individual level in such a diffusion model, speakers are in face-to-face contact with others who have already adopted the new feature, and (for various reasons) they are motivated to adopt it themselves.

The second mechanism is *levelling*, which implies “the reduction or attrition of *marked* variants” (Trudgill 1986a: 98; emphasis in original). ‘Marked’ here refers to forms that are “unusual or in a minority” (ibid.). Levelling, in this sense, is closely related to (indeed, results from) the social psychological mechanism of *speech accommodation* (Giles and Powesland 1997; Trudgill 1986a:1–4), by which (provided mutual good will is present) interlocutors will tend to converge linguistically. In a situation (such as in a new town) where speakers of different, but mutually intelligible dialects come together, countless individual acts of *short-term accommodation* over a period of time lead to *long-term accommodation* in those same speakers (Trudgill 1986a:1–8). Also, in such a situation, a form of non-accommodatory behaviour may influence the outcome: this is the avoidance of forms which are negatively evaluated as highly local in favour of forms with a wider geographical currency (L. Milroy 2002). The outcome is the levelling of differences among what was at first a conglomeration of varieties, often leading to a new variety characterised by the absence of localised forms (see discussion in Kerswill 2002: 680–689).

There is, thus, a rather awkward terminological ambiguity. Regional dialect levelling is an outcome of various partly geographically-based language change processes. One of these is geographical diffusion. Another is, of course, levelling, in the sense of ‘mutual convergence’. I would propose the use of the term *regional dialect levelling* for the dialect-geographical phenomenon and simply *levelling* (following Trudgill 1986a) for the linguistic changes which are the outcome of accommodation.

Distinguishing between the processes of diffusion and levelling in particular cases requires us to consider information of two kinds. First, we need to look for dialect geographical evidence for the spread of the feature to see whether the apparently ‘new’ feature is diffusing gradually across geographical space, or whether the feature is establishing itself simultaneously throughout a given area – in which case levelling would seem to be present. Conceptually this is straightforward, even though, as we shall see, the interpretation of the data is likely to be problematic. Second, we need to look at the types of communities involved in the change, since there is ample evidence that the rapidity and nature of language change is linked to social structure, as Trudgill has argued on several occasions (1992d; 2002c). This is a harder task than examining dialect geographical evidence, because communities are complex and the analyst’s descriptions of them unavoidably incomplete and subject to interpretation. It is, furthermore, not immediately obvious how community typology relates to the question of diffusion and levelling as change processes. Trudgill suggests (1992d; 2002c: 725) that in some ‘high-contact language communities’, there may be imperfect learning by adults, leading to simplification and relatively rapid change. In relatively high-contact, but largely monolingual areas such as those characteristic of many parts of Britain, we are dealing with dialect contact and the changes that result from it (Trudgill 1986a: 39–82; 1998). In Britain, it is mobility, manifested in commuting and other forms of short-distance travel, as well as relocation, that is perhaps the most marked indicator of high degrees of contact. L. Milroy (2002: 7) argues that such mobility leads to the “large-scale disruption of close-knit, localized networks which have historically maintained highly systematic and complex sets of socially structured linguistic norms”. We can reasonably suppose that a high degree of mobility, which leads to the weakening of group-internal linguistic norms, will render a population more receptive to linguistic (and other) innovations. A consequence of this increased receptiveness is that speakers can be expected to take up diffusing changes more readily, with the result that these changes move more rapidly across the language area. However, it is less clear what the consequence will be in terms of levelling. An initial approach is to suppose that intensive local mobility, especially through commuting, leads to conditions favourable to levelling; both types of change are therefore potentially favoured. I will return to this question after presenting some recent analyses of British dialect data.

British sociolinguistic dialectology and the concept of ‘dialect levelling’

The emergence of a sociolinguistically informed dialectology in Britain can be dated to the late 1960s with Trudgill’s study of Norwich, published in 1974. This signalled a move from the rural to the urban, and with it a conviction that both the collection and the interpretation of speech data had to be socially informed. Studies in Glasgow (Macaulay 1977), Edinburgh (Reid 1978; Romaine 1978) and Belfast (L. Milroy 1980) followed. At the end of the 1980s, a new approach began to appear within this tradition. Concerns became more comparative, in that the aim was to view urban variation in a wider geographical context, instead of focusing narrowly on the social context of a single town or city. Several projects were set up,

dealing with more than one urban centre or with migrants. Some of these are reported in Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle (1989), Kerswill and Williams (2000a), Milroy, Milroy and Hartley (1994), Milroy, Milroy, Hartley and Walshaw (1994), Williams and Kerswill (1999) and Britain (1997a, b).

All of these studies share a concern with the spread of features in geographical, as well as social, space. Several were reported in Foulkes and Docherty (1999), who saw to it that each chapter contained information in a standardised format allowing for ease of comparison. Many of the articles in that book point to dialect levelling as the main ‘motor’ behind changes in British English varieties. In their Introduction, the editors present some of the main themes of the book. On dialect levelling, they say:

Watt [one of the contributors], by way of illustration, summarises the motivation behind ongoing changes in the Newcastle vowel system in terms of younger speakers aiming to ‘dispel the “cloth cap and clogs” image’, and to ‘sound like northerners, but *modern* northerners’. Speakers can achieve these aims by avoiding variants which they perceive to be particularly indicative of their local roots, while at the same time adopting some features which are perceived to be non-local. It seems to be important, too, that the incoming features do not signal any other particularly well-defined variety, because of the potential signalling of disloyalty to local norms. (pp. 13–14)

The claim is, then, that people in Newcastle are (in some sense) aware of what features are ‘old’ and what features are both ‘modern’ and have a wider geographical distribution. These are the motivations for introducing the features into one’s speech.

Dialect levelling of this sort fits in well with the social-psychological mechanism of levelling discussed in the introduction. Variants, old and new, exist in the given geographical region. Speakers adopt the new ones by accommodating to other people who may be socially attractive because of their perceived ‘modernity’. On the face of it, this mechanism conflicts with the geographical diffusion model, particularly since it does not include a geographical dimension. In order to see if these rather different, if not conflicting mechanisms can be accommodated within one model of change, it is necessary to examine relevant data – or, where data is lacking, to outline the type of research that would be needed.

Regional dialect levelling in English vowels

Our first example is from two neighbouring cities in the northeast of England: Durham (pop. 87,000, which includes a large rural area) and Newcastle (pop. 259,000, lying within the larger conurbation of Tyneside). The vowel /e:/, as in *face*, *may*, *rain*, etc., is currently subject to monophthongisation across the region.¹ The older variant is [ɪə]. Figures for the use of the diphthong and monophthong are given in Table 1.

Table 1. /e:/ (as in FACE) in two dialects in the North East of England (per cent use of two variants by working-class subjects). (Kerswill 1984; Watt 2002)

Age group	Durham, 1983		Newcastle, 1994			
	Men 26–59	Women 26–52	Men		Women	
			45–67	15–27	45–67	15–27
% [ɪə]	45	8	63	36	8	5
% [e:]	55	92	37	64	92	95

On the basis of the figures both cities, it is clear that the use of the diphthong [ɪə] is practically the preserve of male speakers. The Newcastle data additionally shows that their use of the variant is declining. We can deduce that the change began with the women, an interpretation that is in line with findings elsewhere that women adopt linguistic features with a relatively wide geographical distribution (Watt and Milroy 1999; Milroy, Milroy, Hartley and Walshaw 1994; cf. Cheshire 2002: 430). Variants such as these are neutral in the sense that they do not signal a strong or specific local affiliation – even though they are not necessarily standardised towards an external norm such as Received Pronunciation, which uses [eɪ].

We can examine the geographical direction of the change. We do not have figures for younger speakers in Durham, though informal observation suggests that the diphthongs are declining there, too. The sex distribution in Durham matches that of Newcastle. Even so, the use of diphthongs is much less among the Durham men than among the older Newcastle men. Taking into account the fact that the Durham recordings precede those from Newcastle by 11 years, one might conclude that monophthongisation is more advanced in Durham. If this is so, we have an example of counter-hierarchical diffusion (Britain 2002: 626; Trudgill 1986a: 50). In our case, this means that a smaller, partly rural location (Durham) has adopted a change before the nearest large city. Set against this conclusion is the danger of comparing two studies which presumably used somewhat different informant selection criteria and methods. Despite this, we can be relatively sure that the feature is *not* spreading from Newcastle to Durham: the differences in the scores are too great for this to be a reasonable conclusion. However, it is not possible simply to conclude that we are dealing with mutual accommodation leading to levelling. In particular, it may be relevant that Yorkshire, the county to the immediate south of County Durham, traditionally has [e:]. Diffusion from there may be reinforcing diffusion from Newcastle. Neither precludes the simultaneous presence of mutual accommodation. Whatever the motivation, we are dealing here with an example of regional dialect levelling. The social and social psychological reasons for this outcome will be dealt with below.

The figures in Table 1 show that the direction, rate and social patterning of change with respect to this vowel are extremely similar in Durham and Newcastle. In the next section, I will compare the two cities' adoption of two consonantal features that are thought to be

spreading from the south of England – the fronting of /θ/ and /ð/ to [f] and [v] – and consider whether any regional identity factors serve to link, or divide, speakers within the North East.

Two examples of changes in the southeast of England give a strong impression of regional dialect levelling there, too. In examining them, we must also consider the possibility of diffusion from London. The vowel /aʊ/, as in MOUTH, appears to be involved in dialect levelling in this region. Tables 2 and 3 show the variants of /aʊ/ in Milton Keynes and Reading, both towns situated some 40–50 miles from London, to the northwest and west of London, respectively.

Table 2. Milton Keynes: percent use of variants of /aʊ/ (as in MOUTH), working-class speakers, interview style. (Kerswill 2002: 697)

	[ɛʊ]	[ɛɪ]	[ɛ:]	[a:ʰ]	[æʊ]	[aʊ]
<i>SED</i> informants (1950-60)	3					
Elderly (2f, 2m)	63.2	25.6	9.8	0	1.2	0
Women 25–40 (n=48)	0	0	11.7	17.2	38.6	31.5
Girls aged 14 (n=8)	0	0	0	5.9	4.7	88.8
Boys aged 14 (n=8)	0	0	0	12.3	3.8	83.1

Table 3. Reading: Percent use of variants of /aʊ/ (as in mouth), working-class speakers, interview style (Kerswill 2002: 697)

	[ɛʊ]	[ɛɪ]	[ɛ:]	[a:ʰ]	[æʊ]	[aʊ]
<i>SED</i> informants (1950-60)	3					
Elderly (2f, 2m)	53.5	38.1	3.3	0	4.1	0.7
Girls age 14 (n=8)	0	2.3	0	8.0	0	90.4
Boys age 14 (n=8)	3.8	3.2	0	5.7	0	87.1

The tables show that this variant and the unrounded [ɛɪ] have almost completely given way to [aʊ] over two or three generations. Reading is somewhat behind Milton Keynes, due, we argue, to relatively more close-knit networks there than in the new town of Milton Keynes

(Kerswill and Williams 2000b). We have argued (Kerswill and Williams 2000a) that Milton Keynes is an example of a further type of levelling, not explicitly dealt with in this chapter: *new-dialect formation*, where mutual accommodation is demonstrably the mechanism behind the development of a new dialect or ‘immigrant koine’ (Trudgill, Gordon, Lewis and Maclagan 2000b; Siegel 1987, 2001). We argued that the more rapid and complete change in Milton Keynes is due to that town’s greater receptiveness to incoming changes, whether spread by diffusion or by levelling.

Secondly, we look at a vowel shift in the southeast of England. Data for this shift, which affects short vowels, is taken from Torgersen and Kerswill (2002; in prep.) and consists of formant measurements (F1, F2) of about 3,000 vowels tokens. The speakers were four elderly and eight teenage informants both in Ashford,² a town some 50 miles to the southeast of London, and in Reading. The purpose of the study was to test the hypothesis that structural (internal) factors would affect the progress of the shift more strongly than the external factor of dialect contact.

Figure 1 employs Wells’ (1982) keyword system to label the lexical sets involved. Each arrow shows the direction and extent of change deduced from a comparison of older and younger speakers in Ashford. It is readily apparent that the change in Ashford is a ‘classical’ chain shift. Figure 2 shows that the Reading vowels do not follow this pattern. First, for four of the vowels there is no change at all. Second, for STRUT the shift is in a different direction. Only for FOOT do we find the same change as in Ashford.

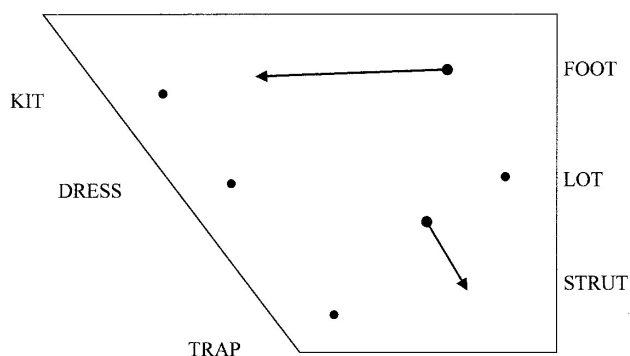


Figure 1. Vowel shift in Ashford

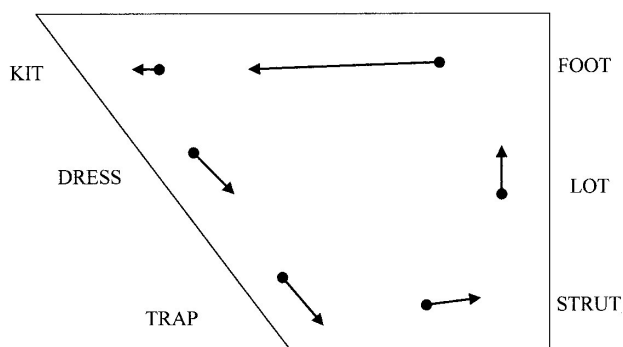


Figure 2. Vowel shift in Reading

Why is there such a big difference between the towns? If we examine the end points of the changes in both towns, we see that the target appears to be the same vowel quality. The difference is, simply, that the starting points of the changes are different – to the east of London the front vowels were higher and STRUT was more front and lower than to the west of the capital. The result is convergence between the vowel systems east and west of the city – an obvious sign of regional dialect levelling. A likely conclusion is that the external factor of dialect contact (whether leading to diffusion or levelling) will override internal structural factors when they are in conflict. This is a conclusion similar to that of Watt (2000), who discusses the symmetrical shift involving /e:/ (as in FACE – discussed above) and /o:/ (as in GOAT) in Tyneside English.

Dialect levelling in English vowels: mutual accommodation or geographical diffusion?

The trajectories of the three examples of regional dialect levelling discussed above are clear enough. However, the bare figures indicate neither the mechanism (diffusion vs. levelling – or both) nor the social motivation. As we have seen, Foulkes and Docherty appeal to a social psychological explanation for (regional) dialect levelling: speakers actively seek out neutral forms in order not to signal very local and possibly old-fashioned identities. This interpretation seems to allow us to do without a diffusion model. As long as the features concerned are accessible in the individual’s everyday life through contact with other speakers, and as long as there is broad agreement as to the social value of particular features, then convergence between varieties may arise. There is no implication that features spread from a more densely populated centre; instead, there may be a kind of balanced mutuality among the varieties (and their speakers) with respect to the loss and adoption of features, governed by a set of shared evaluations (in Labov’s 1966 sense).

The development of these evaluations, however, presupposes a considerable degree of mobility in the population, leading to good opportunities for people to meet others over a relatively large area. It is here that the link between social structure, shared attitudes and lev-

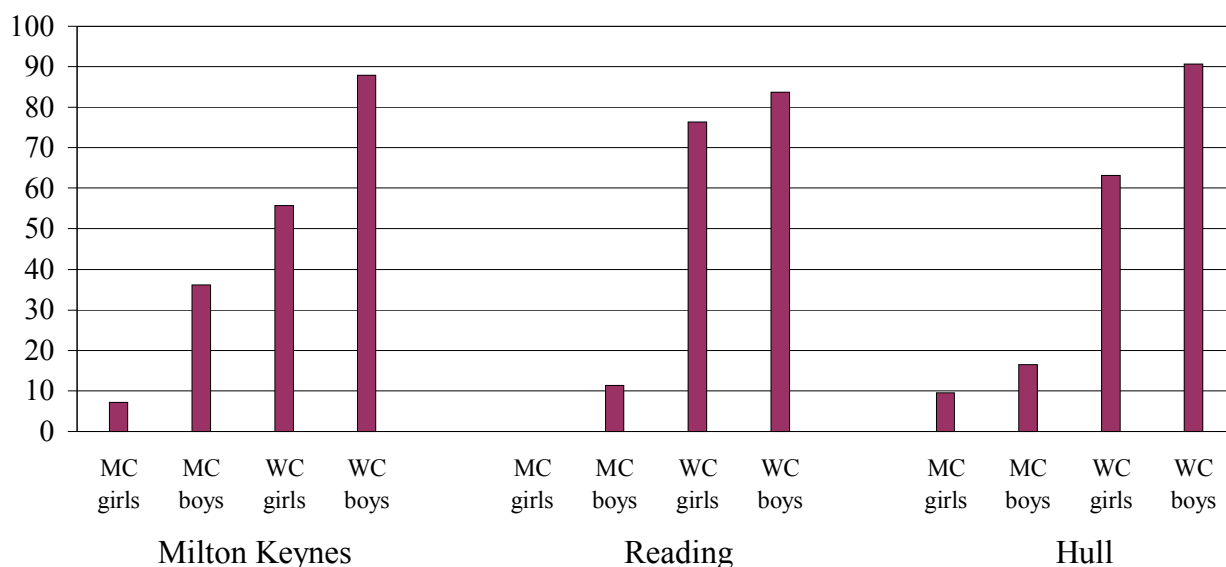
elling (in the social-psychological sense adopted in this chapter) becomes apparent. Shared attitudes presuppose contact; the geographical extent of these attitudes is therefore dependent on the size of the area over which relatively intense contact takes place. This is an idea closely related to Gumperz's view of the 'speech community': "Speech communities, broadly conceived, can be regarded as collectives of social networks" (Gumperz 1996: 362; cited in Patrick 2002: 581) – a view echoing Bloomfield's (1933: 46) statement that "differences of speech within a community are due to differences in density of communication". Levelling takes place both through face-to-face accommodation, steered by shared attitudes. The geographical limit to levelling depends precisely on the degree of mobility, something which in turn is related to the geographer's notion of the functional area [REF]. As an indication, consider the fact that, in the London area, there are commuters who travel up to two hours in each direction – the time it takes (traffic permitting) to travel the 120 miles between Ashford and Reading. Most commute to London, but many also travel to other locations around London. One could find similar patterns in the densely populated hinterlands of other big cities.

At the current stage of research, it is admittedly not yet possible to state the relative contribution of diffusion and levelling. Nonetheless it is possible to come up with some tentative conclusions. It seems likely that levelling is a significant factor in the Newcastle/Durham area, even if features are spreading north from the large cities in Yorkshire. As for the three southeastern towns, it is reasonable to suppose that diffusion is of greater consequence, simply on the basis of a comparison of the relative populations of the places involved: London has a population of eight million, as against 180,000 for Reading and Milton Keynes and 100,000 for Ashford. Unfortunately, research on this has not yet been forthcoming. London has been said to be the principal source of current linguistic innovations in Britain: "Its working-class accent is today the most influential source of phonological innovation in England and perhaps in the whole English-speaking world" (Wells 1982: 301). Without new research we cannot come to any conclusions about the origins of the innovations we have logged in Reading, Milton Keynes and Ashford. At this point we might mention the work of Sandøy (1998), who shows that linguistic innovations involving simplification may diffuse in a counter-hierarchical fashion from the periphery to the centre. This would have consequences for the way we approach the investigation of innovations in London and its satellite towns.

Consonants: torchbearers of geographical diffusion?

There appear to be no reports of vowel changes spreading throughout the whole country: local 'solutions' are the order of the day. The same can, however, not be said of consonants. A feature that has spread through much of England is the use of the labiodental [v] for /r/ in place of [ɹ] (Foulkes and Docherty 2000). Here, we examine three other features: the use of the glottal stop [ʔ] for intervocalic /t/ as in *better*, the merger of /θ/ and /f/ as [f] as in *thing*, and the merger of /ð/ and /v/ as [v] medially and finally as in *brother* and *smooth*. To gain a

picture of the geographical spread of these features, we consider data from Reading and Milton Keynes and, in addition, a large city on the coast of Yorkshire, Hull (Williams and Kerswill 1999).



MC = ‘middle class’
 WC = ‘working class’

Figure 3. Percent use of th-fronting in Milton Keynes, Reading and Hull (interview data).

It is clear from Figure 3 that the three variables have similar sex and social class distributions in the three towns. In each, the variable of class is the better predictor. This distribution is surprising, considering that, in fact, the variables have dissimilar histories. Andrése (1968: 18) presents evidence that glottal replacement of intervocalic /t/ first appeared in the west of Scotland (including Glasgow) around 1860, spreading to the east of Scotland and the far north of England some years later. According to Andrése, the first evidence of glottal replacement in the London area is from around the beginning of the 20th century. By the middle of the 20th century, glottal replacement and glottal reinforcement of intervocalic /t/ was a feature of rural dialects in most of eastern England, but not the Southwest, the Midlands or northern England, including Yorkshire (Trudgill 1974a: 81). The feature seems to have diffused to urban centres outside the Southeast within the last 30–40 years (see Mees 1987 on

Cardiff, and Watt and Milroy 1999 on Tyneside). The phenomenon is therefore considerably older in the southern towns than it is in Hull, which lies in the traditional East Riding of Yorkshire.

The two fricative mergers shown in Figure 3 have a history somewhat different from that of t-glottalling. Figure 4 shows the use of [f] for /θ/ in the responses to the *SED* questionnaire (there are too few occurrences of words with /ð/ for this variable to be mapped out in this way – the normal pattern is for the two mergers to co-occur).³ Filled circles represent localities in which from 2 to 7 tokens of [f] are found in items where [θ] is expected (localities with no tokens or one token are not included). The size of the circles corresponds to the number of tokens. It is clear from the map that there are two separate focal areas for the spread of the change: an area around Bristol and another which includes London and the region to the north and east. On the assumption that innovations spread out from economically and culturally important centres, it is reasonable to suppose that the changes were established early in the two cities and subsequently spread out from them. In each case, the features seem to have spread out in a wave-like fashion. The change had not reached northern England by the time of the *SED* (if we ignore what must be a lexically determined use of [f] in the item *sheath*, which is found sporadically throughout the country).



No. of attestations: ● 7 ● 6 ● 5
 ● 4 ● 3 ● 2

Unfilled circles show positions of Bristol and London.
 The map is taken from Orton (1962: 30), and shows SED localities

Figure 4. Use of [f] in words in which [θ] is expected. (Based on data from *Survey of English Dialects* (1950-61), extracted by Oliveira Filho 1999.)

When did this change begin? The earliest mention appears to be Elphinston (1787), who, according to Wyld (1927: 209) “speaks of a tendency for the ‘low English’ to say Redriphe for Rotherhithe and lofh for loth”. Interestingly, Wyld goes on to say: “At the present time this substitution appears to be rather a personal idiosyncrasy than a dialect feature, though it does appear to be very frequent in a rather low type of Cockney English” (cited in Beal 1999: 19; pc). Even by the early years of the 20th century the feature was not fully entrenched (Hurford 1967 and pc), and was not the widespread, possibly majority form it is now.

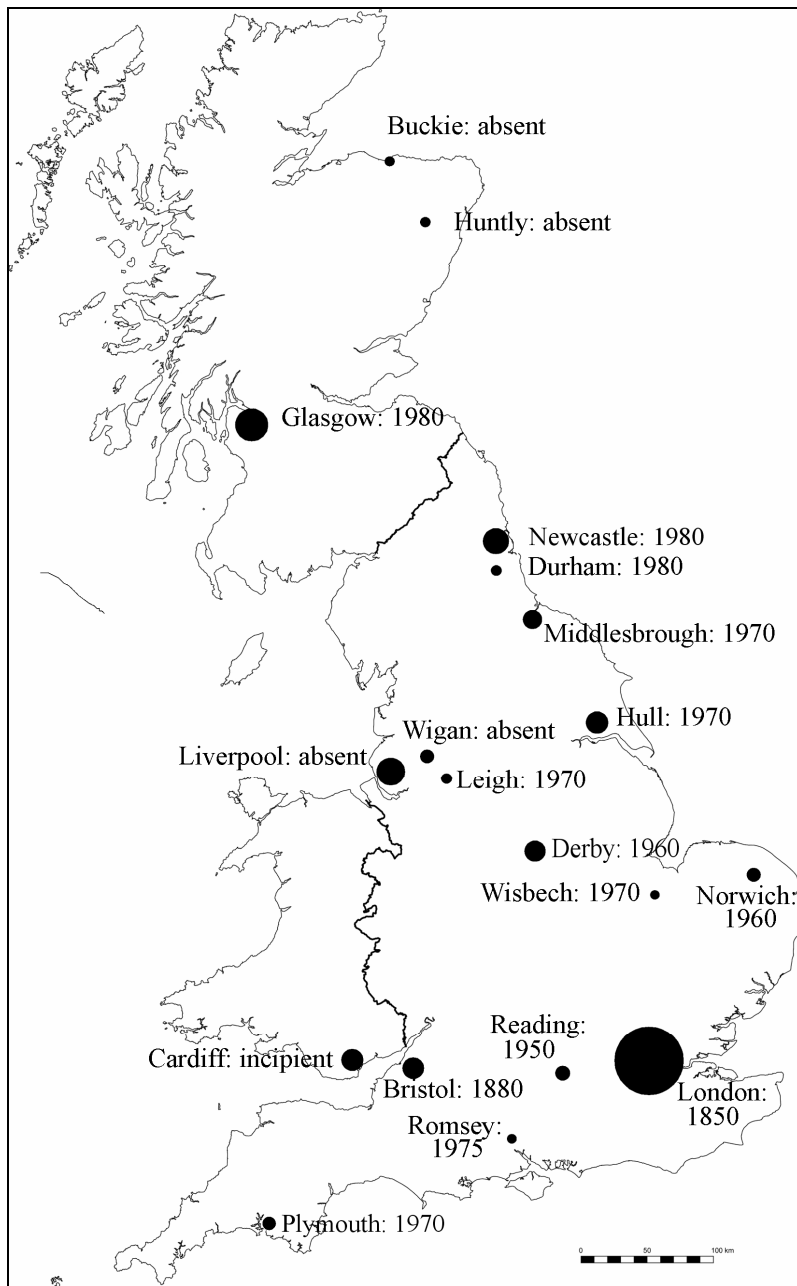
However, there is evidence that it did spread quite rapidly in London speech during the 19th century. Matthews (1938: 82–104) discusses the way in which London dialect (‘Cockney’) was represented in Victorian music-hall song lyrics. Among the lyrics given by Matthews, the relatively routine use of *f* and *v* for orthographic *th* begins with those dating from shortly after 1880. Clearly the stereotype was well established by this time, even if (as we have seen) it remained somewhat rare until well into the 20th century. From this we can very tentatively suggest that, from 18th century (or even earlier) beginnings, the use of [f] and [v] would have been reasonably common (or at least not highly idiosyncratic) by the generation born in about 1850.

We do not know anything for certain about the position in Bristol. The geographical spread of the feature in the area surrounding Bristol was already considerable by the time of the *SED* fieldwork, and this suggests an early date. It is possible that the establishment in 1841 of good rail connections between London and Bristol, which was a large port city in the 19th century, facilitated the adoption of the feature from London before smaller towns and villages in the region. If this is the case, this is an example of the hierarchical diffusion of a feature. We return to this notion below.

We now consider the subsequent spread of this feature. To investigate whether the introduction of the mergers proceeded in a geographically gradual manner, we can try to map the approximate birth dates of the age cohorts who were the first to use the innovations to a significant degree. By this, we mean that the features were used by a substantial minority of adults, and were therefore not idiosyncratic or a result of immature speech. Figure 5 gives this information in the form of years of birth which have been arrived at by an examination of published studies and BA and MA dissertations, as well as through personal approaches to linguists familiar with local speech.⁴ The date for Bristol was arrived at following the argumentation in the previous paragraph. It is clear that the spread proceeds from south to north and that (with the exception of Bristol) the eastern part of the country adopts the change before the western part. As with the *SED* data examined above, the distribution of years can be used to support, albeit tentatively, a hierarchical diffusion model (Trudgill 1982b: 72–78). This is most visible through a comparison of the dates for Derby, Wisbech and Norwich, three cities/towns that are approximately equidistant from London. The population figures for the three towns are as follows:

Derby:	236,000
Wisbech:	19,000
Norwich:	180,000

The order of adoption is as the model predicts: the dates for Derby and Norwich are similar, as are their populations. The much smaller town of Wisbech follows considerably later.



Note: The size of the circles indicates the relative populations of each town/city

Figure 5. Spread of [f] for /θ/ and [v] for /ð/ in low-status urban varieties. Earliest dates of birth of cohorts using the innovations occasionally but non-idiosyncratically.

However, there is a striking sense in which the dates given in Figure 5 for the non-idiosyncratic introduction of th-fronting do not support a diffusion model. The change seems to ‘hit’ very large regions simultaneously, particularly the far north of England (including

Newcastle and Durham) and the central belt of Scotland (represented by Glasgow) at about the same time. For Glasgow, Stuart-Smith and Tweedie (2000: 10) show that working-class teenagers (aged 13–14 in 1999) used about 20% [f] for /θ/ in conversations with a peer, while the feature was completely absent from the older group in their sample (aged 40 and above). In Newcastle, th-fronting was absent from a sample of people aged 15–27 in 1994 (Watt and Milroy 1999; Foulkes pc; L. Milroy pc). However, Will Allen (pc 2003) has provided data for 9–10-year-olds [and 15-year-olds – still to come: PK] that demonstrate that the feature is used to some extent by most children and adolescents. In Durham, none of my 1983 cohort of seventeen 14–16-year-olds used th-fronting; however, 14–15-year-olds attending the same school in 2002 did use the feature to a considerable extent. Figure 6 shows the scores for Allen’s 2000 and my 2002 data. Allen’s sample comprises four girls and four boys aged 9 or 10 at a school in a mainly working-class catchment area in Newcastle. My sample is composed of eight girls and eight boys aged 14 or 15 attending a comprehensive school in a mainly working-class former mining village some three miles from Durham City (though still within the city boundaries). Allen’s recordings are of interviews with the children in pairs. My recordings involve single interviews (with a second adolescent present) as well as conversations between two adolescents and myself and between the two adolescents on their own. The scoring system is as follows:

- 1 = unequivocal [f] or [v]
- 4 = unequivocal [θ] or [ð]
- 2 and 3 indicate auditorily intermediate perceptions; the choice between 2 and 3 forces the transcriber to make a decision as to phonemic category.

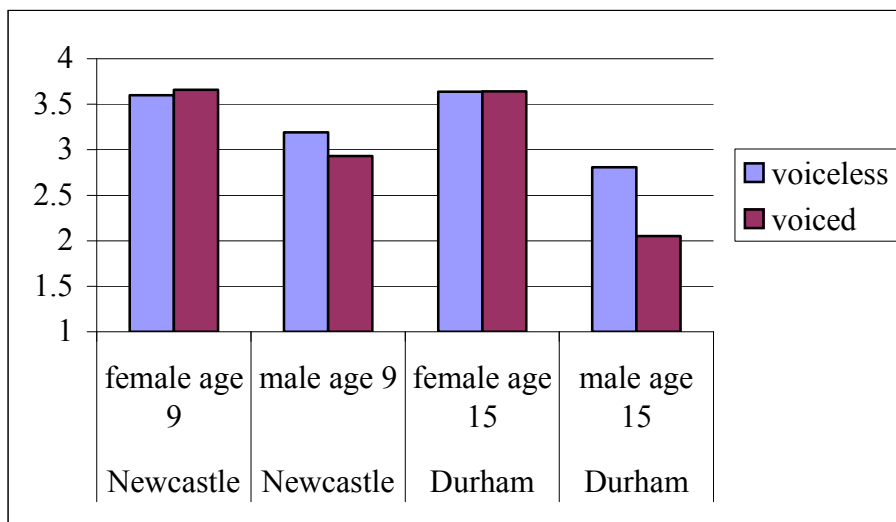


Figure 6. Retention of [θ] and [ð] for /θ/ and /ð/ in interviews and dyads in Newcastle and Durham (working-class subjects).

For both places, the pattern is broadly similar: the boys use th-fronting more than the girls; the boys use more fronting of /ð/ than of /θ/, while the girls show no such difference. It is clear from the available evidence that the feature is entering urban Newcastle and semi-rural Durham at the same time in the same way. As with the discussion of /e:/ above, it is not possible to argue that the feature has diffused from Newcastle to Durham. It seems likely that, again as for the vowel feature, both diffusion (from the south; note that there is evidence that Middlesbrough adopted the feature some years before Durham or Newcastle) and levelling seem to be likely mechanisms for the change. Unlike the case with the vowel, this is a feature that is spreading throughout Britain: a possible scenario for this spread is that, once the feature is adopted by a critical mass of people, perhaps simultaneously in more than one location within a region, it can spread to the remainder of the population by a process of both levelling and diffusion.

Regional dialect levelling and regional identities

Llamas (2000; 2001) expands Watt's (2000; 2002) and L. Milroy's (2002) discussion of dialect levelling in the North East by focusing on regional identity in Middlesbrough, a town some fifty miles south of Newcastle. Llamas's results are extremely interesting in the context of those from Durham. Middlesbrough speakers are increasingly taking on features from the 'Geordie heartland' of Tyneside (including Newcastle), in particular the glottal reinforcement of intervocalic /p/ ([ʔp]). At the same time, speakers are adopting th-fronting as a response to 'image-consciousness': this is a marker of 'youth norms'. Interestingly, it is the young adults who adopt it, not the teenagers (Llamas 2001: 19-22). It is a pattern that distinguishes Middlesbrough from Newcastle. Llamas finds that speakers are highly negative in their attitude to Newcastle speech: "The large majority of the speakers from the combined young group ... claimed that they would object to being mistaken for a Geordie, with many professing a strong dislike of the Geordie accent" (2000: 140). On the face of it, this attitude is not consistent with the general convergence of the dialect towards that of Tyneside, Wearside and Durham (144). She argues that the increasing use of Tyneside variants in Middlesbrough does not imply an identification with Tyneside, but rather an indexation of Middlesbrough identity (143), with people feeling 'Northeastern', but from Middlesbrough. This is to be seen in the context of changes in local government over the past 40 years, which has seen Middlesbrough dislocated from Yorkshire to the south and more closely aligned with Tyneside.

All sixteen Durham teenagers interviewed in 2002 stated that they did not mind being labelled 'Geordies'. The attitudes were almost all positive, with comments that the Newcastle accent was 'stronger', 'broader', and even, 'It's good, aye!'. They reported, however, that they could easily tell the difference between Newcastle and Durham speech. The teenagers said there was no rivalry between Durham and Newcastle, rivalry being reserved for supporters of Newcastle vs. Sunderland football teams (Sunderland is a large city to the imme-

diate south-east of Newcastle). The Durham teenagers were evenly divided in their support for these two teams.

The differences in the convergence patterns between Durham and Tyneside, on the one hand, and between Middlesbrough and Tyneside, on the other, can be seen in terms of this very marked attitudinal difference. The two changes we have noted for Durham and Tyneside are, practically speaking, identical in time, social distribution and phonetic detail in both places. This is not surprising, given the close ties between the cities in terms of work and leisure. Attitudinally, Durham speakers do not particularly distinguish themselves from the Geordies, while recognising (in some cases regretting) that they are not quite 'real' Geordies. A completely different pattern pertains in Middlesbrough. Attitudinally, the situation is highly complex and changing; the most marked feature is hostility towards Tyneside, not matched by the ongoing linguistic convergence towards Tyneside. Contrary to this convergence is the fact that th-fronting was taken up somewhat earlier than in the more northerly cities, and this can be linked to Middlesbrough speakers' wish to distinguish themselves from Tyneside. Local identities in Middlesbrough are apparently not a brake on th-fronting, while this seems to have been the case (until very recently) in Tyneside and Durham.

That the North East is a 'region' is backed up by the dialectological evidence presented here. Added to this is the intensity of contact within the region, perhaps mirrored in the positive attitudes of people in Durham towards those on Tyneside. Middlesbrough has shifted from being self-identified as 'Yorkshire' to having a rather ambivalent orientation towards the North East. Middlesbrough now lies at the very periphery of this region, as is shown by the presence of some linguistic convergence which is, nevertheless, not mirrored by positive attitudes towards Tyneside.

Conclusion

The overall picture supports the view that regional dialect levelling is widespread in Britain. Few researchers have been able to demonstrate its opposite – divergence or diversification – in local varieties; perhaps the best described example is the spirantisation of stops in Liverpool (see Sangster 2001 for a recent discussion).

A focus on the processes behind regional dialect levelling shows that both geographical diffusion and the accommodation-based process of 'levelling' must be taken into account. I have argued that levelling, by this latter definition, can only apply in its 'pure' form in cases where there is high mobility within a relatively compact area (for example, a new town, but also a region like the North East or, perhaps, the South East), with a consequent high probability that individuals will have contact with others throughout the area. This potential for contact clearly has a social-psychological counterpart, as emerged in the discussion of the North East.

The levelling mechanism is unlikely *a priori* to apply over a large and demographically complex area, such as Great Britain. Here, we must suppose – other things, especially media influences, being equal – that geographical diffusion is the more likely mechanism. The dia-

lectological data presented here overwhelmingly supports the position that what we have called ‘regional dialect levelling’ is the result both of diffusion and of levelling.

What appears to be an entirely new phenomenon is the great rapidity of the spread. It is hard to ascribe this solely to any increase in mobility; instead, we may well have to look to the spoken media as a factor which makes speakers more positively disposed towards the incoming forms they hear from the people they meet.

As will be clear from this discussion, mechanisms are not explanations in themselves. For these, we need to look at a range of non-linguistic factors. ‘Natural’ factors can predict the direction of a change spread through contact, such as th-fronting in Britain (the change involves a merger, with the typologically more marked form, the dental fricative, being lost). Non-linguistic factors, especially contact between speakers and social-psychological factors arising from that contact, determine the rate and social patterning of the spread. In some cases, non-linguistic factors override naturalness altogether, as we saw with the vowel shift in Reading.

Notes

1. In common with what is now current practice, I use Wells’ (1982) mnemonic system to identify lexical sets containing the ‘same’ vowel. In this system, this set is represented as FACE.
2. The analyses were carried out using SIL Speech Analyzer.
3. I would like to thank Clive Upton for drawing my attention to the MA dissertation of Oliveira Filho (1999). In it, responses to *SED* headwords containing /θ/ and /ð/ are listed with a view to finding the distribution of these mergers in (mainly) rural dialects in the 1950s and ’60s.
4. I would like to acknowledge information given to me by the following people, though I of course remain solely responsible for the interpretation of that information: Will Allen, Martin Barry, Joan Beal, David Britain, Nikolas Coupland, Paul Foulkes, Jim Hurford, Carmen Llamas, Jonathan Marshall, Clare McCann, Lesley Milroy, Catherine Sangster, Jane Stuart-Smith, Peter Trudgill, Anna Turner, Clive Upton, Dom Watt and Ann Williams.

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