

“The Cardiff accent will be gone ... we’ll all have British accents”: language change in real and apparent time

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This paper will present results from a sociolinguistic research project investigating language change in Cardiff English (CE), using two corpora of transcribed interview data. The first of these corpora comprises 254,000 words from 20 speakers interviewed in 2017. These speakers are split equally by gender and fall into two age groups, 20-30 and 63+ (retired). The second corpus is much smaller and consists of five recordings from the national archives of Wales. It contains 38,000 words from 6 speakers aged 59-80, who were interviewed between 1993 and 2009.

By examining contemporary data alongside legacy data, I make use of both apparent time and real time methodology to explore variation across time in two phonetic features: the (ing) variable and the ‘Kerdiff A’, which have been chosen to represent the global and the local respectively. Non-standard realisation /ɪn/ in polysyllabic words ending *-ing* is well-documented in CE as well as other Englishes, but is rarely studied in relation to age as it is considered a stable sociolinguistic variable (Tagliamonte 2004). Conversely, the ‘Kerdiff A’ is a stereotyped and stigmatized local vocalic feature that shows considerable inter- and intra-speaker variation. The BATH, START, and PALM vowels can be either front, e.g. /æ/, or back, /ɑ/. Front realizations can also be raised, showing a continuum of variation from /æ ~ ε:/, and are produced as /e:/ in performative Cardiff accents (Coupland 1988). This feature has not been analysed quantitatively before.

This paper will address the following research questions: do these two features show variation across age groups and corpora, and thus time? If so, what are the linguistic and social constraints for each feature? As noted above, the (ing) variable is considered stable and thus is not expected to vary over time. However, initial results from an auditory analysis of 2673 tokens reveal that younger speakers use the non-standard variant /ɪn/ significantly less than older speakers in both the contemporary and archive corpora ($\chi^2 = 43.04$, $p < 0.001$). Acoustic analysis of the ‘Kerdiff A’ variable is ongoing, but the public perception that the Cardiff accent is ‘dying out’ (as evinced by the title quote) suggests that we may expect to see it used less frequently by the younger generation. Both variables will be discussed in relation to Cardiff’s changing social context, and whether wider processes of language change seen in other cities in the UK are also happening here.

References

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