

## **Phonological change in London English**

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This paper discusses ongoing phonological processes in London English. Data are drawn from an ongoing project on language change in London and some previous studies in south-east England. Acoustic analysis of all the short monophthongs and some long monophthongs for speakers from different localities and in different age and ethnic groups display various processes. There are both internal and external motivations for these processes. The internal motivations are structural shifts involving several vowels. The shifting of the back vowels has phonetic explanations, but also of the front vowels shift to some degree. These shifts largely follow Labov's principles for vowel shifting (Labov 1994). Important external motivations for change are dialect contact and geographical diffusion which leads to dialect levelling; the clearest evidence for this is the observed convergence between accents in the area. Examining existing and recently acquired datasets, we can identify various change patterns in the vowel systems. Some of these patterns have not been presented earlier.

A clear pattern is a convergence in the short vowel systems in south-east England. It has been argued elsewhere that this is driven by geographical diffusion from London (Torgersen and Kerswill 2004) and that London thus is the centre for accent innovation in the area. However, recent analyses show that this is an oversimplification. A comparison between white and Afro-Caribbean teenagers from London shows different targets for some of the vowels: the teenagers of Jamaican origin (but born in London) have a short vowel system which largely resembles the system found in Jamaican English. It is still unclear whether white teenagers use vowel systems of other ethnic groups as models for change in their own vowel system. However, where the systems diverge, white teenagers have qualities that are closer to RP than Jamaican English. Innovations are also observed: young white informants have a clear shift involving the short back vowels – away from the RP vowel qualities to qualities typical of levelled speech in the south-east. This is found among all (white) informants across the whole south-east area.

Elderly informants, on the other hand, display short vowel systems which are representative of their local areas in south-east England. Comparison of speakers from different

parts of London shows that the outer areas already have the RP target qualities for the some the short vowels also found among the young informants. Elderly informants from inner areas have short vowels which resemble the classic London vowel system. Both groups of elderly informants have however the classic London diphthong shift.

Labov, W. (1994) *Principles of Linguistic Change, Volume 1: Internal Factors*.

Oxford: Blackwell.

Torgersen, E. and Kerswill, P. (2004) Internal and external motivation in phonetic

change: Dialect levelling outcomes for an English vowel shift. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*  
8: 23–53.