

**Embryonic variants as seeds of things to come -
Tracing the phonetic origins and social trajectory of S Retraction
in the South-East of England**

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One of the first to report on the emergence of S Retraction as a phonological change in English English was Peter Trudgill in 2003 (see also Altendorf 2003). The present study will trace the socio-phonetic beginning of this trend by presenting data collected in 1998, i.e. shortly before Trudgill (2003, 59) "observed [S Retraction] informally from a number of people, including broadcasters, all of them apparently under 30".

In English, the term "S Retraction" refers to the retraction of alveolar /s/ in the direction of post-alveolar /ʃ/ in syllable-initial position. It is most advanced in /str/-clusters, followed by /stj/- and /stV/-clusters (e.g. Janda and Joseph 2003, 11).

Much of the literature on the origin of this phenomenon focuses on the articulatory and perceptual bias that seems to favour the production as well as the perception of retracted /s/-allophones before /tr/-and even /tV/-clusters (e.g. Baker et al. 2011, Rutter 2011). On this basis, Baker et al. (2011) interpret S Retraction as a "phonologization of coarticulation" (348) due to "accumulation of [perception] errors" (349). The present study will provide insights into the next phase when the error has become an innovation and enters into and diffuses through the system. For this purpose, it will combine the results of an auditory and acoustic analysis of by now historical data from a socially and stylistically stratified sample of 40 male and female adolescent speakers recorded in 1998 in three different locations.

The auditory analysis shows that retraction is almost confined to /str/- and /stj/-clusters/ and clearly retracted variants to the two lower social classes. The pattern of variation is one typical of a vernacular variant (e.g. WC: 75% > MC: 31%). In the two higher classes, we also identified a group of "intermediate" variants which were hard to classify on an auditory basis. The acoustic values for spectral Centres of Gravity (COGs) of the intermediate variants analysed to date partly confirm our perception-based classification of these variants as intermediate, partly seem to demonstrate the accumulation-of-error hypothesis outlined above since the COG values are sometimes relatively high. We hope to be able to make a firmer statement when the acoustic analysis of all variants, including the examination of spectral peaks, is completed. In the absence of matching apparent- or real-time data but knowing how the trend has progressed in the last 18 years (e.g. Levon and Holmes-Elliott 2013), we will venture to interpret the synchronic pattern of variation as a snapshot of a sound change in progress. As such it takes the form of a change from below that had reached the middle class in 1998 when the development was still at an early stage. It was about to enter the upper middle class where we can find the first intermediate variants which we would normally have interpreted as coarticulatory effects. In retrospect, however, they can be identified as embryonic variants representing "the very earliest stage of linguistic change in progress" (Trudgill 2002, 41) or, in other words, the seeds of things to come.

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