NORWICH REVISITED: RECENT LINGUISTIC CHANGES
IN AN ENGLISH URBAN DIALECT

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In 1968 I carried out what can by now probably be referred to as a traditional sociolinguistic urban dialect survey, employing Labovian methodology, in the English city of Norwich (see Trudgill, 1974). The data obtained was employed, amongst other things, to investigate and make claims about ongoing phonetic and phonological changes in Norwich English. Analysis showed that some of the phonological variables which were investigated appeared to be involved in different forms of social differentiation but to be stable chronologically and not involved in linguistic change. Other variables, on the other hand, did seem to be involved in linguistic change, with some variants in the process of being wholly or partially replaced by others. In many cases it was possible to locate the social class and/or sex group which was the focus of a particular linguistic change (see Trudgill, 1981).

This investigation of linguistic change in the Norwich data was based on the so-called apparent-time methodology (Labov, 1966). In the apparent time approach, the speech of older informants is compared with that of younger informants, and, subject to certain safeguards, differences between the speech of older and younger subjects are interpreted as representing linguistic changes, with younger speakers tending to favour newer forms and older speakers tending to favour older forms. The safeguards referred to normally involve comparisons with older records such as those compiled by traditional dialectologists, where these are available, to guard against the possibility that some differences may be due to age-grading. There are, that is, cases where differences between older and younger speakers are repeated in every generation, and we need to guard against this eventuality wherever possible when using the apparent-time methodology. Obviously, there are many advantages to using the apparent-time methodology as opposed to studying linguistic change in real time, the most
obvious of which is that one can study results immediately rather than waiting for 20 years or so to see what happens. There are also, however, some obvious pitfalls, one of which is that one cannot predict with absolute certainty which of a number of apparent ongoing changes are going to continue to be successful and which not. One cannot be entirely sure, that is, whether one is dealing with a genuine and long-term linguistic change, or with a temporary, possibly fashionable, but ultimately irrelevant fluctuation in usage. In this paper we contrast changes in apparent time, as portrayed in Trudgill (1974), with changes in real time, as these emerge from a more recent follow-up study of the same city, and discuss some of the lessons which emerge.

Typical of the stable variables investigated in the 1968 Norwich survey was (ng). This variable deals with the pronunciation of the -ing suffix in items such as walking, running, Reading, etc. and has two variants, the velar nasal and the alveolar nasal. Indices for this variable were computed in such a way that consistent use of [n] would give a score of 100 while consistent use of the velar nasal would give a score of 0. It emerged from the study that this particular variable was not involved in any ongoing change. Figure 1, from Trudgill (1974), portrays the correlation of the variable with age-group and style (for a discussion of contextual styles in this type of methodology, see Labov, 1966). The fact that the highest scores for this variable were, as can be seen, obtained by the younger and older age-groups, as opposed to the middle-aged groups, appears to be a phenomenon typical of variables which are not undergoing change. We can probably explain this pattern in terms of the lower educational background of older speakers, and in terms of the greater influence of the peer group on younger speakers as opposed to that of the mainstream norm on middle-aged speakers. In any case, we can note that variables not involved in change do not demonstrate an even distribution across age-groups, as might have been supposed, but rather a curvilinear age-graded pattern of the sort that we see in Figure 1. Other stable variables of this type from the 1968 survey which have this pattern include (h), which deals with the presence or absence of /l/ in the lexical set of hammer, house etc.; and (a:), which covers the degree of fronting or backing of the vowel of cart, last, dance. Both of these variables correlated with social class, with [h], for instance, being more typical of higher class speakers, and [a:] more typical of lower class speakers. They did not, however, correlate with age. Variables of this type thus give the lie to claims that variation is always due to ongoing change.

A Norwich variable typical of the other type, namely those involved in change in the 1968 survey, was (e). This refers to the degree of centralisation of the vowel /e/ before /l/ in words such as bell, well, healthy. There are three major variants to this variable: [e], [i], and [ʌ]. Scores were calculated in such a way that consistent use of RP-type [e] would give an index of 0, while consistent use of the most extreme local pronunciation [ʌ] would give a score of 200 (see Chambers and Trudgill, 1980, for a discussion of this methodology). As Figure 2 demonstrates, a correlation of scores for this variable with age and contextual style shows that this variable contrasts markedly with (ng) in its patterning, and indeed appears to be involved in a rapid change in progress. Rather than the symmetrical curvilinear pattern associated with (ng), (h) and (a:), we can note here a very steep slope of the graph upwards from the middle age speakers to the younger speakers from right to left across the graph indicating a very sharp rise in the use of cen-
have meant that in the 1980s, for the first time ever, large scale quantitative studies in real time of linguistic changes in particular dialects are now feasible. As a consequence, the sociolinguistic literature is beginning to show that a number of scholars are currently seizing the opportunity to update and re-evaluate their data in the same way (see, for example, Cedergren, forthcoming).

There appear to be in principle two different approaches that one could adopt in returning to the site of one’s original research in order to carry out a real-time study, as I have done. First, one could seek out one’s original informants and re-interview them to investigate whether, how and to what extent their language had changed. This was the approach adopted by Cedergren. There are some obvious difficulties with this approach, particularly the death and other forms of unavailability of some of the informants. The other approach is to return to the field-work site and to interview younger informants who were not born or too young to be included in the original sample. This latter was the course of action that was adopted on my return to Norwich. I believe that this decision has been vindicated. We know of course that the speech of even socially and geographically non-mobile adults does change during the course of their lifetimes. However, it is apparent from this study that these changes are in most cases rather small. Most of the more dramatic changes that have recently occurred in the Norwich speech community have not affected at all the speech of those who did not have the features in question by the time they were adults. It is only by studying the speech of the next generation along, it turns out, that we obtain a true picture of the full range of linguistic changes. Ideally, however, the two approaches should be combined. In this way we would achieve a better understanding of the relative importance of children, adolescents and adults in the production of different types of linguistic change.

The original Norwich sample consisted of 60 informants who were born between 1875 and 1958 who were thus in 1968 aged between 10 and 93 (a policy decision having been taken to exclude children under 10 — see Trudgill, 1974). The sample was a random sample based on the electoral register and on school class-lists. In 1983 I investigated the speech of 17 additional informants, selected on a quota-sample basis to conform to the social class profile of the earlier sample. These informants were born between 1958 and 1973, and were thus at the time aged between 10 and 25. Fifteen extra year-groups were thus added to the sample in line with the fifteen-year gap which had elapsed between the two periods of field-work. There is, then,
an overall age-range, in the two samples combined, of 98 years.

Some obvious methodological problems presented themselves in the planning of the 1983 field-work. The biggest problem was perhaps myself. In 1968 I had been a 24-year-old student only recently removed from my native Norwich speech community. In 1983 I was nearly 40 years old and had been away from the speech community for various extended periods of time over a period of 20 years and my speech had clearly changed. In order, therefore, to secure as far as possible comparability of the two data sets, the decision was taken to employ as an interviewer a person younger than myself who had never left the Norwich speech community.

A further difficulty was involved in the decision that was ultimately taken to keep to the original 1968 methodology in its entirety. Since the late 1960s, of course, many methodological advances have been made in sociolinguistics and we know much more about procedures for securing and recording good data. It was therefore tempting to introduce some methodological innovations into the new field-work. This temptation, however, was resisted: none of these advances was actually employed, again because of the problem of the comparability of the data. For example, there was a danger that we might in 1983 succeed in obtaining data that was more genuinely vernacular than that obtained in 1968, which would of course have led to inaccurate conclusions about the direction and speed of linguistic change.

Finally, the reading passage which had been employed during the original field-work, and which had been written in a colloquial style designed to provoke relatively informal reading styles, was also now outdated in its content and language. It referred to shops in Norwich which no longer exist, for example, and contained vocabulary typical of the 1960s, such as “the latest gear”. However, once again, the decision was taken to retain the reading passage as it stood in order to achieve comparability. This decision does not seem to have caused any difficulties.

We can note that the 1983 work produced some interesting nonphonological findings. For instance, it is clear that a considerable amount of lexical attrition has taken place in the local dialect of younger speakers. In both surveys, use and knowledge of a small number of local dialect words were investigated. It emerges that many dialect words such as dwile (dish cloth) and mawther (girl), which had been used by older speakers in the 1968 sample and were at least known by most middle-aged and younger speakers, were totally unknown to the 1983 sample. The one exception to this was the word squit (nonsense) which continues to be both known and used by speakers of all ages.

Secondly, questions on varieties of language showed that a clear change in linguistic attitudes and awareness has also taken place. To simplify somewhat, we can say that the 1968 middle-class informants tended to make a distinction between the urban dialect of Norwich and the rural Norfolk dialect, and to regard the Norwich dialect as unpleasant and the Norfolk dialect as “nice” or at least “quaint”. The working-class informants, on the other hand, tended to have more favourable attitudes towards Norwich speech, and to look down on Norfolk dialect as having unfavourable country yokel connotations. The members of the 1983 sample failed to make such a distinction between the urban and rural dialects, which reflects the reality of the rapid spread of speech forms from the city into the surrounding countryside, as well as considerable suburbanisation of the villages surrounding Norwich. They were also altogether more positive about local speech forms. A number of them referred, for example, to the use of locally-accented speakers on BBC Radio Norfolk and appear to regard this as a positive step forward. It is probable that local radio itself has had an effect in influencing evaluations of local speech forms in a positive way. On the other hand, there was also a much greater awareness than there had been in 1968 of the way in which outsiders regard local speech forms. This is most probably to be ascribed to increased geographical mobility, and to a very heavy increase in immigration to Norwich, particularly from the Home Counties, in the past 15 years. There was, for example, a definite recognition that people from outside the East Anglian region tended to regard all East Anglians, rural and urban, as “sounding like farmers”. We are thus presented with the interesting paradox of an improved self-image as far as Norwich dialect is concerned combined with an increase in defensiveness with respect to the attitudes of outsiders, particularly Londoners. It is possible that these attitudinal factors have been involved in the development of at least one linguistic change, that involving /θ/ and /ð/ (see below). Because of the methodology adopted, we do not know whether a change of attitudes on the part of the older speakers interviewed in 1968 has occurred or not.

As far as phonetic and phonological change is concerned, a number of changes continue trends that were already apparent in 1968. For example, the use of the vowel /eɪ/ in the lexical set of gate and face, which was vestigial in 1968, has now disappeared from the speech of these 10 to 25-year-
olds, although it can still be heard in the speech of older people. We can therefore predict its total disappearance and replacement by the newer form /ai/ in the next 20 years or so. Clearly, this is also one change which has affected the speech of many adults during the course of their lives. There are certainly many people in the community who used to say /feZs/ but no longer do so. Similarly, the use of the relic form [e] in *bird, turkey* etc. which was also vestigial, has also now totally gone from younger Norwich speech. Moreover, the merger of the vowels of *beer* and *bear* as /e:/ is now complete, with all speakers except those from the UMC failing to make this distinction. On the other hand, the merger between the originally distinct lexical sets of *moan* and *mown*, which in the 1968 sample was confined to a small number of middle-class speakers, is now beginning to expand, and a number of speakers from other social class groups are now beginning variably to adopt this feature. There has also been an increase in the use of variants of /ai/ as in *nice* with a back rounded onset [ai]. All these phenomena confirm the 1968 apparent-time findings.

However, we are also presented with some interesting phonetic and phonological cases where certain weaknesses in the apparent-time methodology could be argued to have been revealed. For example, there is at least one feature which we can see in retrospect was involved in 1968 in the beginnings of a linguistic change but which was not perceived or treated as such. This is the change in pronunciation of the consonant /r/. The original pronunciation of this consonant in Norwich English was as a post-alveolar approximate. Now, to an astonishing degree, the younger generation has changed over to employing a labio-dental approximant [v]. Figure 3 demonstrates the percentages of each of the age groups investigated in the two surveys who have the newer labio-dental pronunciation. In fact, this change in Norwich pronunciation is strikingly apparent even to the casual observer. This feature was already present in Norwich English in 1968, as Figure 3 shows. The sample of informants was, however, not large enough to throw up very many speakers who had this feature. I therefore regarded it as an idiosyncratic feature in the speech of those who did have it, assuming it to be simply a speech defect. In a sense, of course, it was a speech defect, at some stage in its development. However, when a speech defect spreads to a majority of the population it is clearly no longer to be regarded as such. Figure 3, moreover, suggests very strongly that this pronunciation will be the norm or at least the majority pronunciation within the next few decades. Observations suggest, incidentally, that this will be true of very

many other varieties of (at least) southern EngE also. However, rather than cite this phenomenon as an example of an inherent weakness in the apparent-time methodology as such, I prefer to ascribe the failure to spot this particular linguistic change in progress to the smallish sample size and/or to the lack of perspicacity on the part of the investigator. Note that this is one feature that would not have been thrown up by a follow-up approach which relied only on recontacting previous informants: no speakers in Norwich appear to have changed their pronunciation of /r/ in this direction in the course of their lifetimes.

In other cases changes have taken place in Norwich English which were not predicted on the basis of the 1968 apparent-time study simply because there was no trace of them in the data. One example of this type is provided by a phonetic change which has affected the vowel /u:/ of the lexical set of *moan, road, rose*. In Trudgill (1974) I described this phonetically as being typically [u:], contrasting with the vowel of *mown, rowed, rows* which was [ʌu]. Now, as we have seen, there is an increasing tendency for these two vowels, under the influence of RP and the neighbouring dialects, to merge, as the corresponding front vowels /e:/ as in *made* and /e:i/ as in *maid* already for the most part have. With /u:/ and /ʌu/ the merger remains
This of course fails to explain why it is this feature of London English and no other that has been adopted, and in any case cannot be correct, for if it were we would expect all areas of the country to be affected simultaneously. This is not in fact what is happening. In spite of the rapidity of the change, we are nevertheless able to detect geographical patterning, with areas close to London being affected before areas further away, and areas in the north of the country being totally unaffected as yet. The pattern of geographical diffusion suggests very strongly that face-to-face contact, as a result of mobility and immigration (see above), must be involved (see Trudgill, 1986). The sheer speed of the change, however, may be due to a softening-up process produced by the engendering of favourable attitudes through television programmes, as well as to the salience of this feature (Trudgill, 1986) and the naturalness of the change. This is a further example of a change which would not have been revealed by the recontact methodology: current observations suggest that no speaker has lost this contrast in post-adolescent years.

In other cases, we find a reverse kind of phenomenon. That is, we observe that some changes which we would have predicted from the 1968 data to be ongoing appear to have stopped or to be continuing in rather complicated and unpredictable ways. For example, we note in the 1983 data a small continuing increase in the use of the glottal-stop realisation of inter-vocalic and word-final /l/. The variable (/) deals with the realisation of /l/ in items such as bet and better as [t], [tʰ] or [ʔ]. Scores are calculated in such a way as to give speakers who consistently use [ʔ] an index of 200, and speakers who consistently employ the RP variant [t] a score of 0. Figure 5 thus shows a small increase in glottal-stop usage in casual styles, but it is also apparent that there has actually been a more dramatic increase, if we look at the rise of lines from right to left across the graph, in more formal styles. One reason for this must be that very little increase in glottal-stop usage in casual styles was possible simply because younger speakers were already employing close to 100% anyway. But the increase in formal styles tallies very well with a strong common impression shared by many older people that younger people in many parts of Britain today no longer feel [ʔ] to be a stigmatised feature to be avoided in certain situations, as older people do. This graph thus provides an interesting example of the way in which a change, having gone almost to completion in casual speech, continues to spread from style to style. We can take this as a vivid example of the way in which linguistic innovations spread not only from person to person, area to area, class to class, and linguistic environment to linguistic environment, but also from contextual style to contextual style. Here is confirmation that most linguistic changes begin in unmonitored, vernacular informal styles and only later spread to more formal varieties of speech. There is, however, one caveat that we should introduce at this point. We have to point out that, methodologically, there is one way in which the two data sets could never have been strictly comparable. In 1983, younger people were much more familiar with cassette recorders and with being recorded than anybody was in 1968. Tape-recorders are now very much a feature of many homes and schools, and are no longer regarded as alien and somewhat frightening machines. It could therefore be argued that some of the apparent increase in glottal-stop usage in formal styles might simply be due to the less daunting nature of the tape-recorded interview. However, the fact that other variables, with one exception, do not behave in this way greatly reduces, in my view, the likelihood of this being the correct explanation. Increases in glottaling (Wells, 1982) do also appear, impressionistically, to have occurred or to be occurring in the speech of post-adolescents, but this is not supported as yet by research data. Probably, recontact methodology would therefore have been relevant in this case. (Note that in
reading figs. 5 and 6 age-grading has to be allowed for in that both the 1948-57 and 1958-73 groups were aged 10-19 at the time of recording.

The exception, a further somewhat complex example of change, is provided by the variable (e). As we saw above, the variable (e) was a very clear example, probably the clearest example of all in the 1968 data, of a variable involved in linguistic change. This is apparent in figure 6 from the very steep rise between the scores obtained by those born in 1938 and those born in 1958. The 1983 data, however, shows somewhat surprisingly that this change appears to have halted, except again that the change does continue in the two more formal styles — see figure 6. That is, reading-passage style and word-list style are beginning, as it were, to catch up with the more informal styles. This halting of centralisation was not predictable from the 1968 data. It is, however, quite readily explicable. Note first that the rise in scores in the more formal styles is not due to further actual centralisation of the vowel but rather to a higher proportion of centralised tokens. In other words, the movement in phonetic space has halted and we are now going through a period of consolidation in which older less-centralised variants are becoming less common. There is a clear and interesting phonological explanation for this halting of the phonetic drift. What has happened is that centralisation of /æ/ in this environment has now gone so far that tokens of /æ/ are now identical with, and presumably therefore are capable of being perceived as, tokens of /ʌ/. That is, total merger of /æ/ with /ʌ/ before /l/ has been achieved, so that, for example, hell and hull are now identical. Notice, however, that for the time being the total merger has been achieved only in informal speech. This is evidence that some phonological changes such as mergers proceed in a stylistically gradual way. Exactly why the phonological merger means the halting of a phonetic change in progress is not entirely clear, but it seems that a change involving /æ/ before /l/ is not carrying over to become a change to /ʌ/ before /l/ once surface identity has been achieved. However, we must continue to assume non-identity of underlying forms until the merger has been carried through totally in all styles, and children acquiring the dialect no longer have any reason to suppose that hell and hull are phonologically distinct.

If we can summarise the findings from our study of linguistic change in real time and the comparison with the earlier apparent-time study, we note that we can differentiate between the changes we have investigated on three different parameters. First, two of the changes studied have been extremely rapid. In the case of the loss of /θ/ and /ð/ we can ascribe this rapidity to multiple causation, with both linguistic and attitudinal factors being involved. The relatively rapid change involving the phonetics of /æ/ is less easy to account for, but it is clear that it involves yet another stage in the weakening of the pronunciation of this consonant which, in addition to loss in non-prevocalic position, has also experienced in the last several centuries a progression of changes in the south of England as follows: [r] > [r] > [u] > [u]. The other changes studied have on the other hand been progressing much more slowly, and represent consolidation of existing trends. Secondly, it is probable that some of the changes we have dealt with are to be regarded principally as cases of the geographical diffusion of innovations into the Norwich speech community from outside: the loss of /θ/ is a case in point. Other changes appear to be internal to the system, such as the centralisation of /æ/ before /l/ and, probably, the fronting of /ʌ/. Yet others, such as the loss of /ð/ and the development of [u], are more problematical to categorise and may, as we have seen, come into both categories. Thirdly, some of the changes we have observed appear to be due entirely or mainly to developments in the speech of children, while others seem instead or as well to influence the speech of post-adolescents and adults. Thus the change to [u] is not something which happens in the
speech of those who have already acquired [j], while the loss of /e:/ in face etc. is something which does affect the speech of individuals during the course of their lifetimes. It is tempting to make a connection here and suggest that rapid changes are those that are system-internal and occur in the speech of children, while slower changes are those which are the result of external influence and which occur in the speech of adults. However, as Table 1 shows, as ever it is more complicated than that. It is hoped that continuing research in real time in the Norwich speech community will be able to shed further light on these issues. The apparent-time methodology is an excellent sociolinguistic tool for investigating linguistic changes in progress, but, especially provided that one can find something else interesting to do in the meantime, the study of linguistic change in real time is in many ways an even more informative experience.

Table 1 Variables involved in linguistic change

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