

Linguistic markers of England's north-south dialectal divide: an attitudinal study of BATH and STRUT

This study investigates the indexicality of two supposedly salient markers of southern accents in England, the presence of distinctions between FOOT-STRUT and TRAP-BATH. Claims that the southern realisation of STRUT can be found outside its traditional dialectal bounds (Wells 1982), and that the FOOT-STRUT split isogloss is spreading northwards (MacKenzie et al. 2014), suggest an apparent inequality between these dialect markers that this study seeks to examine quantitatively.

Many studies in the field of perceptual dialectology involve dialect recognition experiments in which subjects are tested on their ability to recognise dialect-specific phonological cues in speech stimuli (Preston 1993; Clopper & Pisoni 2004). However, although differential recognition rates have been attributed to contrasting phonological cue salience (Williams et al. 1999), few studies have been devised to look for particular linguistic features and their strength in indexing dialect regions (Inoue 1999).

Speech stimuli were recorded from both northern and southern speakers, producing a dataset of twenty neutral carrier phrases with an equal distribution of the four dialect-appropriate vowels (STRUT - /ʊ/~/ʌ/, BATH - /æ/~/ɑ:/) in phrase-final position. A matched-guise technique was adopted to investigate the indexicality of these markers; 46 native-speaker informants from the north and midlands of England were exposed to the stimuli and asked to provide ratings from 0% (sounding 'extremely northern') to 100% (sounding 'extremely southern').

Unsurprisingly, the southern variants of BATH and STRUT both receive higher average ratings on the scale than their northern counterparts. Crucially, however, there are striking differences between the southern markers, in the predicted direction, with a lower average rating for STRUT (71%, $\sigma = 18$) compared with BATH (85%, $\sigma = 10$). A repeated measures two-way ANOVA confirms the statistical significance of this distinction.

There is also preliminary evidence to suggest that the status of these markers is not stable, but actually changing in apparent time; younger informants provide a more neutral evaluation of both dialectal realisations of STRUT. Conversely, while these are converging to a more neutral evaluation, the ratings of the two forms of BATH are actually diverging, moving to more extreme evaluations for younger speakers.

The results of this study suggest an inequality between the social salience of dialect markers, with a likely influence of the actual geographical distribution of these variants; furthermore, there is a tentative indication that the strength of their indexicality as markers can possibly change over time, parallel to changes in the dialects themselves.

References

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