

When sound change isn't led by social change: The case of Northern English (ng)

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Incorporating sociolinguistic evaluation into explanatory models of language variation and change has become increasingly popular in recent years (e.g. Eckert 2000; Zhang 2005; Podesva et al. 2015), dating back to Labov's (1963) influential study of Martha's Vineyard. However, not all objects of linguistic variation can accrue social meaning (Eckert & Labov 2017), and there remain a number of apparent limitations relating to its role in the incrementation and propagation of sound change (Bermúdez-Otero forthcoming). This paper bears directly on this debate by reporting on a recent change in Northern English /ŋg/ clusters, which sees increasing post-nasal [g]-presence in words like *wrong* and *hang* when in pre-pausal position (Bailey 2018). Post-nasal /g/-deletion progressed along a systematic pathway of change throughout the Modern English period, following an ordered set of stages laid out by the life cycle of phonological processes (Bermúdez-Otero & Trousdale 2012). However, this new pre-pausal behaviour does not represent the next natural stage along the same pathway of change laid out by the life cycle, but is rather an entirely separate and unpredicted innovation. As such, it is amenable to an analysis in which external factors - such as sociolinguistic evaluation - play a central role.

Independent evidence from a matched-guise task reveals another source of apparent time change: the indexical strength of [ŋg] as a feature of northern dialects is increasing over time. However, this does not translate to uniform evaluation, with no evidence of a shared evaluative norm among these subjects. Furthermore, despite the change in production being restricted to pre-pausal contexts, this change in the social meaning of (ng) is not concentrated on any particular environment, suggesting that the two are operating at different levels of granularity and that there is no causal link between them. Consequently, these results cast further doubt on the extent to which social meaning is involved in producing macroscopic patterns of sound change.