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Chain shifting and accent levelling in south-eastern British English

This paper addresses the notions of a chain shift as a natural mechanism of phonetic change and the idea that this internal process can be overridden by other non-linguistic factors.

Acoustic analysis of the short monophthongs with younger and older speakers in two towns in south-east England, Reading and Ashford, suggest an approximation in the vowel systems between the towns. Both places show fronting of the FOOT vowel and backing of STRUT. In addition, there is fronting of GOOSE and in the offset of GOAT. Only Ashford, however, exhibits a chain shift in the whole short vowel system following Labov's principles and his pattern three in particular (Labov 1994). The findings, on the other hand, go against Labov's pattern four chain shift which describes a rise of the short front monophthongs.

Related studies show that the change may be explained as part of a universal process in several varieties of English (Ash 1996, Clarke et al. 1995) in addition to the principles of chain shifting. FOOT and GOOSE fronting have been found in a number of varieties including Australian, Canadian, American and southern British English. Front vowel lowering is also reported in Canadian and Californian English (Clarke et al. 1995).

Another explanation can be found in the regionalisation of phonological systems centring on metropolitan areas (Watt 2002) and in the accent convergence between towns in the south-east (Kerswill and Williams 2000). Levelling, which is the reduction in the number of realisation of linguistic units, can explain the modifications which lead to more similar phonological systems.

This presentation will go further into these processes and present a framework for the analysis of the vowel changes.

Keywords: phonetic change, internal and external factors

References

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