

Pathways of obsolescence: Scots /u(:)/ across borders  
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Abstract:

In areas where Scots has survived hundreds of years of contact with English, the regional Scottish Standard English (SSE) has been described as one pole of a “bipolar stylistic continuum” for language use, with traditional Scots being the other pole (Aitken 1984). Modern speakers in Scotland are thus sometimes considered bidialectal, combining both Scots and SSE dialect features, with their respective grammatical, phonological, and lexical variants. This is complicated additionally by the well-documented observation that many features of traditional Scots are subject to the dialect levelling that is widespread throughout the United Kingdom. Previous sociolinguistic studies of the variable OUT class vowel in Scotland have found the vernacular Scots /u(:)/ and the SSE diphthong /ʌu/ to correlate with social factors, consistent with Labovian change from above towards the regionally prestigious diphthong (e.g. Macaulay 1977, Macafee 1994, Stuart-Smith 2003). Various contextual factors, such as style-shifting to accommodate different interlocutors, speech acts, and topics, have also been shown to influence the choice of variant between vernacular Scots and SSE (Stuart-Smith 2003, Smith and Durham 2012). This study addresses a gap in analysis of /u(:)/ by examining the appearance of OUT class /u(:)/ among conservative speakers with the hypothesis that variation in the OUT class is not due only to style-shifting, but is conditioned by underlying phonological, grammatical, and lexical frequency constraints among these speakers.

Data are drawn from The Roots Archive (Tagliamonte 2001-2003, 2012), which was collected with the goal of documenting *relic area* speech, which is characterized by the retention of older features no longer present elsewhere. The Roots Archive is comprised of sociolinguistic interviews with elderly residents of four towns around the Irish Sea—Cullybackey and Portavogie in Ulster Scots Northern Ireland, Maryport in northwestern England, and Cumnock in southwestern Scotland. Despite the national borders separating the towns, they are historically linked by trade and migration, and previous work has shown them to share features of the same regional dialect, patterning similarly for typical Northern morphosyntactic and lexical variants (Tagliamonte 2012). A subset of the Roots Archive consisting of thirty-seven speakers, stratified by town and sex and ranging in age from 54 to 92, was auditorily coded for every token of the OUT class (N=5350). The data were analyzed using a mixed effects logistic regression model incorporating both linguistic and social factors and a local lexical frequency measure based on word frequency in the corpus itself.

Speakers in each town exhibited the same phonological, grammatical, and lexical patterning despite the overall difference in rate of Scots /u(:)/ between towns. Across towns and across subgroups of speakers within each town, function words were most likely to retain /u(:)/; moreover, appearance of /u(:)/ was clearly correlated to lexical frequency. This study also attempts to address previous analyses, such as Smith and Durham (2012), which questioned the hypothesis that the OUT class /u(:)/ is obsolescing by testing for stable bidialectalism as an explanation for OUT class variation alternative to the previously assumed rapid dialect attrition. In this study, the speaker subgroup with the highest rate of /u(:)/ in each town was made up of the members of that town’s central industry (i.e. mining in Cumnock, agriculture in Cullybackey), indicating a possible link between use of the Scots variant and a strong local-industrial identity. I reject a hypothesis of stable bidialectalism in these communities and argue that the grammatical function and lexical frequency constraints that occur in this data provide evidence of the route of lexical transfer which obsolescence of the Scots /u(:)/ phoneme has taken in previously-studied urban dialects. While these studies have found Scots /u(:)/ in as few as seven function and other high-frequency words (Macafee 1994), in the Roots Archive robust variation occurs in forty-eight distinct lexical items, showing it to be a stronghold of the Scots monophthong and a valuable resource for insight into how the phoneme may have receded elsewhere in the face of pressure from the regional standard.

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