

Linguistic variation and identity: Sound change along a national border

Dialect contact at borders raises many questions regarding the geographical and linguistic dynamics of sound change. For any single variable, is the direction of change uniform across the area of contact? Across variables within a given area, is there any general tendency towards homogeneity or differentiation?

We address these questions with data from the Accent and Identity on the Scottish-English Border (AISEB) project, which examines phonological variation and attitude in four border towns: Gretna and Eyemouth (Scotland) and Carlisle and Berwick (England). Here we discuss coda (r) and the Scottish Vowel Length Rule (SVLR). Scottish English (ScE) typically retains coda (r), while most varieties of English English (EngE) are nonrhotic; SVLR is characteristic of ScE, while vowel length in most varieties of EngE is subject to a general voicing effect. Interestingly, while speakers readily mention (r) as a feature which distinguishes these dialects, they rarely if ever mention vowel-length differences.

Ongoing work (e.g. Llamas et al 2009) shows that change in (r) use is not uniform along the length of the border, particularly on the Scottish side. This divergence can be related to differing attitudes towards national identity: young Eyemouth speakers identify more strongly as 'Scottish' and use more coda (r), while young Gretna speakers identify more weakly as Scottish, and prefer nonrhotic forms. In contrast, we find that change in SVLR has occurred in a more uniform manner, with young speakers from both Scottish localities less likely to exhibit SVLR than older speakers in the same communities.

The attitudinal explanation for some of our findings is given weight by our use of an innovative technique for the quantification of attitudinal data, the Magnitude Continuum (Redinger & Llamas 2009). Interviewees are asked to show the extent to which they agree with nationally-oriented statements such as 'I feel British, but I'm definitely more English [for English interviewees] / Scottish [for Scottish interviewees] than anything else', and to show the relative importance to them of local and national identity labels such as 'Berwicker', 'English', 'Scottish' and 'British', by placing marks on a continuum from 'agree' to 'disagree' or from 'unimportant' to 'very important'. The distances of these marks from the ends of the continuum, or between the marks themselves, can then be measured, and this quantitative information can be directly compared with quantitative information about linguistic productions.

We therefore find that while the borderlands show increased heterogeneity in (r), there is increased homogeneity with respect to SVLR. We suggest that an explanation for these patterns lies in the variables' differential uses in identity-making and -marking, and discuss the implications for processes of dialect levelling and diffusion.

References

- Llamas, C., Watt, D., Docherty G., Hall D. and Nycz, J. 2009. *Variation and Change in /r/ in the Scottish/English Borderland*. Paper presented at The 7th UK Language Variation and Change Conference, Newcastle University, UK, September 2009.
- Redinger, D. & Llamas, C. (2009). Innovations in the measurement and analysis of language attitudes. Poster presented at Production, Perception, Attitude Workshop, Leuven, Belgium, April 2009.