

ACCENT VARIATION IN ADOLESCENTS IN ABERDEEN: FIRST RESULTS FOR (hw) AND (th)

Thorsten Brato

Department of English, University of Giessen, Germany
Thorsten.Brato@anglistik.uni-giessen.de

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the first results of a major study into accent variation in a socially stratified sample of urban adolescents in Aberdeen. The variables (hw) and (th) were analysed in word-list style and reading style. The results indicate changes in progress for the first variable. The status of the second variable is as yet unclear. TH-fronting was found only infrequently and seems to be restricted to some speakers.

Keywords: Aberdeen, Scotland, accent variation, urban dialectology, adolescents

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on urban accents in Scotland have revealed changes in progress in a number of consonants, e.g. [11] for Glasgow and [9] for Livingston, a New Town in the Central Belt area between Glasgow and Edinburgh. Traditional Scottish realisations such as [ɹ] in words like *which* or *what* or postvocalic /r/ are being lost. At the same time the variant [f] for the variable /θ/ in words like *think* or *mouth* that is found in many other urban accents in the British Isles [3] is now well-established in younger working class (WC) [11], [1] and in some younger middle class (MC) speakers [1] in Glasgow. TH-fronting was first mentioned as occurring sporadically in Glaswegian by Macafee [6]: 34, n. 26. The most recent study available on Edinburgh [2] does not mention the variant [f]. In Glasgow, the process of /θ/-lenition, resulting in [h] in initial and intervocalic positions, is found infrequently in casual speech and competes with [f], although [h] is restricted very much to single words [10].

A major research project carried out by the present author for his PhD dissertation focuses on accent variation in urban adolescents in Aberdeen for which the status of eleven variables is analysed. Both local forms, such as the replacement of /ɹ/ with /f/ in *wh*-words and forms like TH-fronting or L-vocalisation will be considered. This paper reports preliminary results for the variables (th) and (hw) in word-list style (WLS) and reading style (RS) for a socially stratified sample of 85 adolescents in two age groups in Aberdeen.

2. LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN ABERDEEN

Aberdeen has a population of about 202,000 and is Scotland's third largest city. It is one of the most northerly major cities in the world and is the economic, industrial and cultural capital of North-East Scotland. Owing to the discovery of oil in the North Sea in the early 1970s, the city has experienced substantial changes in its population structure. Many incomers from other parts of Britain and the rest of the world have settled in the region. Together with social stigmatization of dialect speakers and contact to other dialects by means of an increased media influence, this has had a major effect on the local dialect [8].

The English spoken in Aberdeen and the North-East of Scotland is generally associated with the Doric dialect of Scots [7]. As Hughes et al. [4]: 105 note, however, the English used in Aberdeen City lies on a continuum between Doric and Scottish Standard English, with many younger speakers approaching pronunciations found in Glasgow or Edinburgh.

The most prominent feature of the accent is the retention of the old Northern Scots variant [f] for /ɹ/, which is still prevalent in many people's everyday speech [7]: 47. Thus speakers in Aberdeen have (in casual style (CS) at least) a three-way choice between the standard variant [ɹ], the non-standard local form [f] and the incoming [w]. The variant [h] for [θ] is rare in the Northern Scots regions [5]: 507. In urban speech, the initial cluster /θr/ can have the variants [ɹ] and [sɹ], which are strongly stigmatised [12].

3. METHODOLOGY

The data for this study stems from recordings of 85 adolescents in two age groups (8-10 - labelled as Y - and 13-15 - O) from three socially different backgrounds in Aberdeen. One set of participants comes from a public school with pupils from both Aberdeen and other parts of Britain (MC). A second set comes from two lower middle class/upper working class areas (MA for mixed area), the third set is from a traditional working class district (WC).

The corpus consists of about 40 hours of speech over three different styles differing in their formality. In WLS, the participants were asked to read out a set of 96 words, covering a wide range of linguistic variables and phonetic environments. A phonetically rich story of 281 words was used to collect data in RS. Sociolinguistic interviews of self-selected pairs (where possible), lasting between 30-50 minutes each, form the casual style (CS) data. Linguistic and non-linguistic background data has been collected and will be correlated to allow conclusions to be drawn on the interplay between age, gender, social identity, dialect contact, and possible media influence. Table 1 shows the informants profile:

Table 1: Informants profile

speakers	young (8-10)	old (13-15)
MC female	6	5
MC male	5	7
MA female	14	8
MA male	8	6
WC female	7	9
WC male	6	4

The data was recorded with a Marantz PMD 670 digital recorder and AKG C680 microphone at 44,100 Hz and for the purposes of this paper was analysed auditorily by the present author.

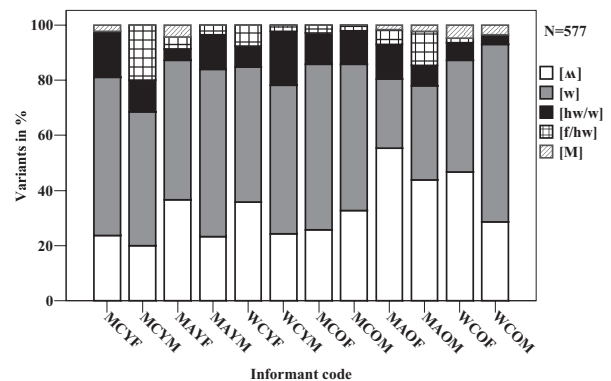
4. RESULTS

The first impressions from the results for the two variables presented in this paper suggest that younger speakers in Aberdeen are different in their variation pattern compared to other urban areas in Scotland.

4.1. (hw)

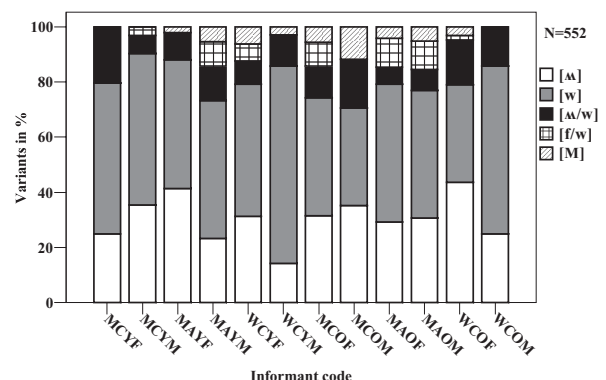
The results for the variable (hw) as presented in Figure 1 show the great variability found in adolescents in Aberdeen. The variant represented here as [ʌ] comprises a range of sub-variants such as [ʌ], [xw] and odd instances of [χw]. Together with [w], they are found most frequently, whereas the local [f] is basically absent, with only four tokens in WLS and five tokens in RS, and has been grouped under [M] in the figures. The absence of [f] is not surprising, as it is generally only found in CS. The high figures of auditorily intermediate forms for both [ʌ/w] and [ʌ/f] could indicate changes in progress. In WLS, [w] is found frequently in all groups, with the exception of MAOF and MAOM. My general impression from the fieldwork is that these two speaker groups

Figure 1: Distribution of the main variants for the variable (hw) in WLS



are rather conservative in their speech and use typical North-Eastern features most and the incoming variants only very rarely. The high figures for [w] in the MC groups is surprising, especially when compared to data from Glasgow [11]: 239f. The exact reasons behind this are as yet unclear. Since many children with an English English background attend this school, we cannot exclude the possibility of linguistic influence from these speakers on our speakers. The results for the WC speakers on the other hand seem to confirm the trends found in Glasgow. Here [w] is used to dissociate from the standard as spoken by MC adults. There is only very little difference in the distribution of variants on the level of the individual words.

Figure 2: Distribution of the main variants for the variable (hw) in RS



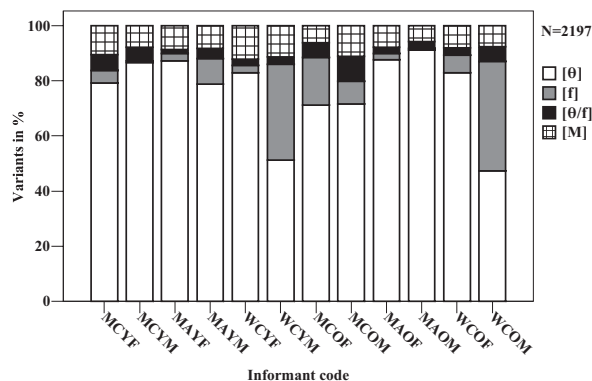
The results in RS are very similar to WLS. There is a decline in [w] in the MCO groups which is not due to an increase in [ʌ] but rather to the more frequent use of intermediate variants. An interesting pattern is found in the older MA pupils. They now have [w] much more often than in WLS and their re-

sults are similar to those of the other groups. This could be due to two reasons, either the lesser formality of RS or the smaller range of words in this style. Looking at MAOF in particular, we see that there is not only variation between speakers but also intra-speaker variation even in the same words.

4.2. (th)

The variation pattern for (th) in Aberdonian adolescents is somewhat different to that from the Central Belt. Four main variants were identified. [th] indicates the standard form [θ]; the incoming variant is represented as [f]. A range of intermediate forms that auditorily could not be clearly assigned to [θ] or [f] is labelled [θ/f]. [M] comprises several miscellaneous forms such as odd instances of voiced or pre-glottalised dental fricatives, [h], [t] and [s] as well as some [ɹ] realisations in the words *three* and *thriller* and 21 tokens (mainly in young speakers of all sets) for the affricate [ts] in some words.

Figure 3: Distribution of the main variants for the variable (th) in WLS

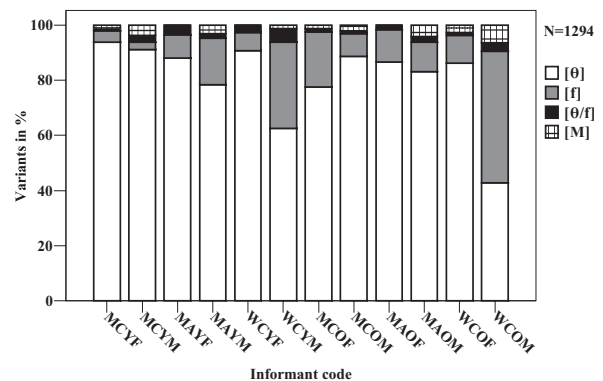


[θ] is clearly the prevalent form in all groups apart from the WC boys of both age cohorts. The exceptionally high figure for [f] in the older MC girls is due to one speaker, who is responsible for 20 out of 25 tokens. On the other hand, TH-fronting is virtually absent in MCYM and MAOM, with one token each. Variants auditorily between [θ] and [f] were mainly found in the MC groups.

The picture in RS is slightly different from that of WLS. The figures for the MC and WC groups are rather stable. MCYF have more standard forms here, although this is because of a decrease not in [f] but in the intermediate and miscellaneous forms. In MCOF, the same speaker is again responsible for most (16 out of 18) of the fronted tokens. There is a considerable increase in TH-fronting in all MA groups, which is particularly strong in MAOM.

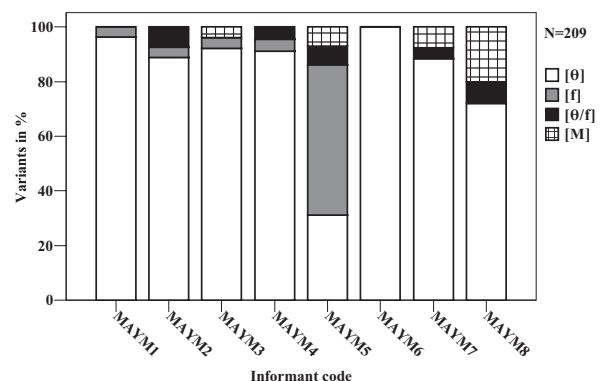
When we look at the data at the level of the indi-

Figure 4: Distribution of the main variants for the variable (th) in RS



vidual groups, a very different pattern from that of the inter-group variation arises. For 13 out of 83¹ speakers, [f] is not attested in either style; this figure rises to 26 in RS and 39 in WLS. The results indicate that each set contains just one or two speakers for whom TH-fronting is found to any large extent, with the exception of MCYM, which is by far the most conservative group with only three instances of [f] in a total of 213 tokens taken over both styles. All MAOM speakers have a high figure for the standard variant in WLS. It is interesting to note that MAOM5 - who did not front at all in WLS - has [f] in 25% of his realisations in RS. All other speakers retained their conservative pronunciation patterns. Figures 5 and 6 exemplify the variation found in WLS and RS for MAYF and are a good illustration of the general findings:

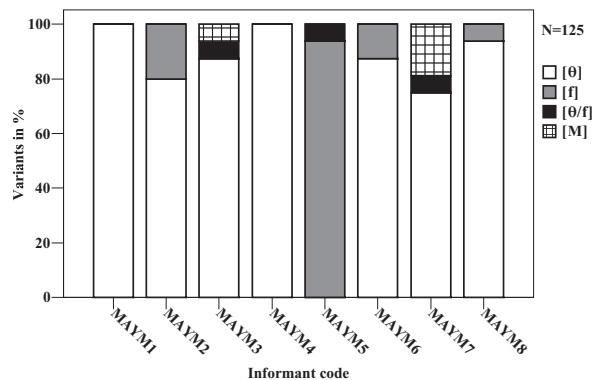
Figure 5: Distribution of the main variants for the variable (th) in WLS in MAYM



Of the speakers in this group, only MAYM5 has a high frequency of TH-fronting in both styles - in RS he uses it almost categorically. All other speakers in that group have either no [f] or only in one or two

tokens.

Figure 6: Distribution of the main variants for the variable (th) in RS in MAYM



5. DISCUSSION

The data presented here shows complex variation patterns for the two variables in WLS and RS. The status of standard variant for (hw) is certainly changing. [w] is found frequently in all groups, apart from MAOF and MAOM in WLS. Although the analysis of the CS data is still pending, it seems that [f] is definitely growing stronger. It is as yet unclear whether this change is occurring by means of lexical diffusion.

The status of the variable (th) is more complex. Systematic TH-fronting seems to be in its very early stages in adolescents in Aberdeen and is only found frequently in those speakers who either described themselves or were described by their peers as different from the group. This is true for MCOF1 – a goth who is distinctly unlike her peers regarding social and cultural ideologies – as well as two boys of the WCOM group who referred to themselves as neds (a Scottish expression for loutish youths), an impression that was shared by their peers and myself. Particularly interesting in both WCO groups is the high use of overt Scotticisms such as *da ken* ‘don’t know’ paired with distinctly non-Scottish phonological variants such as TH-fronting.

The status of dialect contact as a catalyst for the changes found in this study remains as yet unclear at present, but is likely to be a factor in both the retention of some traditional features as part of a general North-Eastern identity, as well as the spread of incoming features.

6. CONCLUSION

The data presented in this paper are the initial results of a major study into accent variation in ado-

lescents in Aberdeen. Despite their preliminary status (and particularly the as yet unanalysed conversation data), they show quite clearly that urban Aberdonian is changing. It is difficult to draw conclusions as to the exact reasons for the variation patterns presented here. What is needed, therefore, are the results for the conversational data and, even more importantly, the analysis of possible correlations between the other linguistic and non-linguistic variables.

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¹ For two speakers, RS could not be recorded.