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An Overview of Sociolinguistics in England

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Introduction

As we sat down for dinner at a conference in Rouen in May 2014, we got talking about the recent publication of *Sociolinguistics in Scotland*, edited by Robert Lawson. We were told that similar volumes were being planned for Ireland and Wales (they have since been published—in 2016 for Ireland, edited by Raymond Hickey, and in 2016 for Wales, edited by Mercedes Durham and Jonathan Morris). We were both working on sociolinguistic topics in England and therefore keen to complete the series, so we laid the plan for a similar publication. To our delight, Palgrave welcomed our proposal and you are now reading the fruit of what started as a dinner table chat.

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This book, similar to its counterparts in Scotland, Ireland and Wales, encompasses a range of studies representative of the research conducted in the sociolinguistic field in England in the 2010s, notably on phonological, lexical, syntactic and intonational variation in English and British Sign Language. Set out over the next 13 chapters, they contribute to the development of sociolinguistic theory and suggest directions which may be fruitful for future studies. This introduction provides a short synopsis of the development of sociolinguistics as academic field in England. Finally, it considers directions which future research could, and perhaps should, take.

Previous Work on Sociolinguistics in England

Here we review previous dialectological and variationist work on varieties of English in England, outlining studies which encompass different aspects of the interplay between language and society. While this review presents a wide range of topics, we do not claim that this is a complete overview, but we aim to highlight important milestones in the development of sociolinguistics as academic field in England.

In the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century regional variation was the main concern of linguists and philologists. A first large-scale dialectological survey was carried out by Alexander John Ellis in the middle of the nineteenth century. He used a dialect test in which people, usually from small villages, were asked to read a short passage of 76 words in their local dialect in order to identify dialect areas that were mainly based on vowel distributions. Some decades later, in the early twentieth century, Wright published his highly influential *English Dialect Dictionary*, a six-volume collection of dialect words, compiling 70,000 dialect words which is now available as digitised source.[1]

In the middle of the twentieth century, Harold Orton started work on the *Survey of English Dialects*, choosing the rural fieldwork sites. The aim of the project was to preserve a record of 'traditional vernacular, genuine and old' (Orton 1960: 332). Data were collected by fieldworkers who mainly interviewed non-mobile, older, rural males (cf. Chambers

and Trudgill 1980) in these rural communities, that is, the least mobile, most static people in the fieldwork sites. Orton shared the sentiment on the need of recording traditional dialects before they are lost with Wright, who stated in the preface to the *English Dialect Grammar*: 'There can be no doubt that pure dialect speech is rapidly disappearing […] The writing of this grammar was begun none too soon, for had it been delayed another twenty years, I believe it would by then be quite impossible to get together sufficient pure dialect material to enable anyone to give even a mere outline of the phonology of our dialects as they existed at the close of the nineteenth century' (Wright 1905: iv–v taken from Beal 2010: 3).

From the 1970s onwards, there was a notable shift away from dialectological topics towards variationist sociolinguistics with Peter Trudgill as the most influential representative of this approach in England. His work in Norwich mainly focused on external factors such as gender and social class in order to explain the present variation. Seminal works such as *Dialectology* (1980; with Jack Chambers), *Dialects in Contact* (1986) and *The Dialects of English* (1990) were based on his sociolinguistic and dialectological work in England and Norway. While Trudgill mainly focused on phonological variation of adult speech, in her playground study Cheshire (1982) explored grammatical variation in the speech of children and found that children already show language variation, and boys use more non-standard forms than girls. She concluded that language variation on the grammatical level is governed by social and linguistic factors.

In the 1990s, consequences of dialect contact were explored further and two seminal projects on dialect contact situations in England were conducted. Dialect levelling and diffusion were identified as driving forces in language change. Kerswill and Williams (e.g. 2000) picked up the idea of new dialect formation from Trudgill (1986) and investigated dialect levelling and the creation of a koine in Milton Keynes, a New Town west of London. Britain (1997) also investigated dialect contact scenarios in the Fens, a sparsely populated area in the east of England, where he showed the geographical proximity is not the only factor influencing language use in dialect contact situations and that we must also

take into account the accessibility and psychological orientation of people. A question, which has sparked a lot of discussion in sociolinguistics in the last two decades, is whether local and/or regional varieties will be lost and a more general variety is the future of English in England or whether urban centres grow more apart in their use of language.

In the 1990s, a large project on *Phonological Variation and Change in Contemporary Spoken English (PVC)* investigated phonological variation and change in present-day urban dialects (cf. Milroy et al. 1999), focusing on Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Derby. The team around Lesley and James Milroy investigated variation and change processes in a considerable number of vowels and consonants. One of the outputs of this project was the edited volume *Urban Voices* (1999) by Foulkes and Docherty, in which phoneticians describe and discuss the variation in a number of urban varieties in the UK and Ireland. This book was highly influential for the research conducted in these areas in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It set the scene for investigating changes by diffusion, in particular of consonantal variables, such as Richards (2008), Jansen (2012) and Flynn (2012).

Research into the dialect use in the North East has a long tradition. The data of the PVC project were preceded by the *Tyneside Linguistic Survey* (TLS) in the 1960s, an investigation into the local dialect. In both projects, TLS and PVC, interview data were collected. Under the direction of Joan Beal, Karen Corrigan and Herman Moisl, the data of both projects were then amalgamated to what became the *Newcastle Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English* (NECTE, http://research.ncl.ac.uk/necte) in the early 2000s. This corpus was complemented by a corpus based on recordings conducted at the University of Newcastle since 2007, called NECTE 2. Both corpora were then combined to *The Diachronic Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English* (DECTE, http://research.ncl.ac.uk/decte/). The current website represents a unique example of a publicly available online corpus presenting dialect material spanning five decades. Various trend studies resulted from this corpus (e.g. Beal and Corrigan 2007; Barnfield and Buchstaller 2010). Isabelle Buchstaller's latest project involved panel studies where she traced some of the speakers from the TLS project and investigated their lifespan change (Buchstaller 2015). Buchstaller and Mearns report on some of these results in Chap. 9.

While dialect research in urban areas has been in focus since the early days of variationist sociolinguistics in the 1960s, Tagliamonte used a comparative sociolinguistic approach to study 'which changes are the legacy of its origins and which are the product of novel influences in the places to which it was transported' (Tagliamonte 2012: 1) by investigating morphosyntactic variation in peripheral areas of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The aim of this project was to study in how far the variation of certain forms provides a 'window to the past'. Jansen picks up this point in her study of vowel variation in West Cumbria in Chap. 12.

Although there has been a long history of migration to the UK and particularly England, people only started to focus on language contact situations due to ethnic migration in the middle of the 2000s. Jenny Cheshire, Paul Kerswill and their team studied the emergence of Multicultural London English in the two major projects *Linguistic Innovators: the English of Adolescents in London* and *Multicultural London English: the Emergence, Acquisition and Diffusion of a New Variety.* Torgersen and Fox provide an overview of findings from these projects in Chap. 8.

The third-wave approach to language variation (cf. Eckert 2012) has been applied and developed further by a number of researchers in the first decade of the 2000s. By employing ethnographic methods, Moore (2010) investigated how different groups of girls in a Bolton High School use language to create identity. She identified two groups of female teenagers on the basis of their different attitudes, behaviour and lifestyle choices and showed that these groups use language to create their identity. Sharma and Rampton investigated the use of style and dialect developments in ethnic groups from an interaction sociolinguistic point of view, and in Chap. 5 Rampton discusses the stylisation and dynamics of migration, ethnicity and class. Drummond reports on initial results from his UrBEn-ID project in Chap. 4. The project investigates ways in which young people in an urban environment use language in the construction, negotiation and performance of their identities.

While most of the studies mentioned above explore the production of language, studies on attitudes towards and perception of varieties have a fairly long tradition in Great Britain and Montgomery discusses this in more detail in Chap. 6. In recent years, the so-called north-south divide in England has sparked interest for linguists. This is a culturally engraved

concept in England and linguists have been interested whether this can be delineated by language. This has resulted in the investigation of the linguistic markers separating the two regions (e.g. Wells 1986; Trudgill 1999). But it has been noted that this is not a straightforward division (e.g. Goodey et al. 1971; Wales 2002; Montgomery 2007; Beal 2008). There are clear stereotypes for the north and south, and they extend beyond language to political and socio-economic issues. The two main isoglosses which separate these two regions are the pronunciation of the STRUT and BATH vowels. These are very salient markers to people and can form important aspects of identity (e.g. Beal 2010: 14). However, Beal also comments that these particular examples of variation are relatively new and stem from the seventeenth century but since this time these distinctions have become very indicative of regional background.

There are problems with the north-south divide, for example, how areas like the East Midlands fit into the picture. The boundaries between north and south are defined in different ways. Beal's linguistic north does not include the East Midlands (Beal 2008: 124–5), neither does Wales' (2002: 48). Trudgill states that in traditional dialectology, the East Midlands area falls under *Central* dialects, which come under the *Southern* branch, but in modern dialectology, it falls in the *North* (Trudgill 1999: 35, 67). Hughes et al. (2012: 70) include a map which has the East Midlands in the north. Linguistically, the question has been raised whether there is a clear north-south boundary, see for example Upton (2012), where it is proposed that this region is a transition zone. There is other work on such transition zones, for example, Chambers and Trudgill (1998) and Britain (2003, 2013).

While Montgomery (2007) investigated the larger picture of this perceived border, Braber looked at the perceptions and attitudes in the East Midlands, a region where northern and southern features are used which resulted in the speakers not identifying strongly as being either from the north or the south but also from the Midlands (Braber 2014). Further study showed that the students were unlikely to name the East Midlands when mentioning dialect areas around the UK. They were also inaccurate when it came to labelling the East Midlands voices in dialect recognition tasks. The East Midlands may not have much cultural salience, and this could result in these students making errors in recognising and categorising the recorded voices. Pearce (2009) noted that cultural salience is an

important aspect of identifying north-east varieties which could explain the problematic identification in the East Midlands. Another aspect of the issue of the inability to label local varieties was brought out by students rating them negatively when they discussed the mind maps, which can be linked to Montgomery and Beal (2011) who investigated claims and denials by speakers and their significance. What is also interesting is that the students in Braber's study did not comment on an east-west divide (see also Upton 2012: 267), although there is a West Midlands that they could differentiate themselves from. Wales has shown that the location of a division can depend on the background of the speaker with those coming from further south placing the divide further south and vice versa (2002). Montgomery (2007) examines this in more detail. This divide is particularly pertinent to the public and continues to be the focus of a heated discussion.

In recent years, two workshops focusing on the north and the south have been launched. For a decade now, the Northern Englishes Workshop has run biennially and two books investigating northern varieties have been published (Hickey 2015; Beal and Hancil 2017). In 2014, a Southern Englishes Workshop was started to give awareness to the fact that varieties in the south of England are understudied. This workshop has so far run three times and in 2017 a meeting focusing on language variation and change aspects of southern English varieties took place.

Current Volume

The present book completes a series of volumes on sociolinguistic research in the British Isles, namely *Sociolinguistics in Scotland* (Lawson 2014), *Sociolinguistics in Ireland* (Hickey 2016) and *Sociolinguistics in Wales* (Durham and Morris 2016). In all of them the increase of mobility and therefore the increase of diversity has been stressed and this theme continues in this book. In designing the volume, our aim was to present the wealth of sociolinguistic research currently taking place in England. We have included investigations into language variation and change (Jansen, Nance et al., Fabricius, Sandow and Robinson), lifespan change (Buchstaller and Mearns), perceptual dialectology (Montgomery), historical sociolinguistics (Auer), corpus investigation (Schembri), language

contact (Torgersen and Fox), interaction sociolinguistics (Rampton), sociophonology (Barras), linguistic ethnography (Drummond) and semantic change (Braber, Sandow and Robinson). The structure of the volume is designed to reflect linguistic diversity in England.

In Chap. 2, Auer investigates the supraregionalisation processes behind the spread of the third-person singular –*s* form during the Early Modern English period in four locations. Fabricius discusses, in Chap. 3, changes in Received Pronunciation, the most prestigious accent in England. Drummond provides a pilot study on language use by urban youth in Manchester in Chap. 4. In Chap. 5, Rampton explores how practices like stylisation and language crossing fit into larger structures like migration, ethnicity and class. Montgomery, in Chap. 6, deals with the perception of the dialect landscape in England by non-linguists. Schembri et al. present variation and change results from their British Sign Language (BSL) corpus in Chap. 7. In Chap. 8, Fox and Torgersen provide an overview of results from the Multicultural London English projects. Buchstaller and Mearns investigate lifespan change in individuals in Tyneside in Chap. 9. Braber explores the lexical items present in 'pit talk' in the East Midlands in Chap. 10. Nance et al. explore intonational variation in Liverpool English in Chap. 11. In Chap. 12, Jansen discusses variation in the high back vowel in the peripheral area of West Cumbria. Sandow and Robinson present case studies of semantic changes in sociolinguistic contexts in Chap. 13. In the final Chap. 14, Barras conducts a comparative analysis of residual rhoticity and emergent *r*-sandhi in the north-west and south-west of England.

Future Direction

The sociolinguistic landscape in England is rapidly changing. As elsewhere, factors such as inward and outward migration and greater social mobility are leading to more diverse communities. Our aim with this volume is to show how current research on sociolinguistics in England highlights avenues for future research.

In addition to changing demographics, consequences of the political situation of the UK in this day and age will become more prominent in

linguistics. At the time of writing (March 2017) the UK is leaving the European Union (EU), discussion of an independent Scotland is back on the cards and an exodus of EU citizens from Britain is possible. However, the linguistic consequences are not predictable. At the same time, heritage language transmission and preservation are of linguistic interest as these processes can provide us with more information about language contact.

Sociolinguistics mostly concentrates on smaller case studies as the funding of large-scale studies is often problematic. However, digital humanities may open the way for collecting large data sets from wide regional areas. The team around David Britain has shown with their dialect app how large data sets can be set up and analysed. The rapid advancement of technology will facilitate new paths for sociolinguistics and dialectological studies.

The chapter by Schembri et al. shows that more research in the sociolinguistics of BSL is needed. We are only starting to understand variation in this language and case studies complementing the available BSL corpus are necessary to deepen our understanding.

One last point is the underrepresentation of certain areas in sociolinguistic work in England. Regions like the East Midlands and the south of England have not been subject of much research but form unique social settings worth studying.

Notes

1. English Dialect Dictionary is available online: http://eddonline-proj.uibk.ac.at/edd/termsOfUse.jsp

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