Social correlates of changes in mid-vowel in Northern England

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Much literature on sound change in UK English of the past decade has focussed on a set of Southeastern features diffusing northward into Midlands and Northern dialects (Foulkes & Docherty 1999, Kerswill & Williams 2000, 2005, Britain 2002, Kerswill 2003, Milroy 2003, Watson 2006, Llamas 2007). Central to most accounts of these changes are local speakers' understandings of individual linguistic features as indices of place, but also age, gender, class, and urban tribe (Williams & Kerswill 1999, Watt & Milroy 1999, Watt 2002, Dyer 2002, 2010, Llamas 2007, Richards 2008). Excepting Watt's (2002) and Watt and Milroy's (1999) work in Newcastle, however, none of the published literature has examined change in a principal stereotypical feature of Northern speech, namely monophthongal realisations of mid-vowels in FACE and GOAT lexical sets. In particular, Watt (2002) and Watt and Milroy (1999) relate the conservation of Northern monophthongal forms in Newcastle to the symbolic importance of FACE/GOAT as a marker of Northern speech and community members' sense of identity as Northerners. They provide no controlled data in support of this claim, however.

This paper reports on a study of FACE/GOAT variation in the Northern English city of York. We report data from two sources. One set of data consists of wordlist and conversation recordings from 16 native speakers of York English aged 18-24 (8F/8M) gathered in 2008. We correlate production data from these speakers with attitudinal data for each participant using a methodology adapted from the Survey of Regional English (Llamas 2007). To assess evidence of real time change, we compare the 2008 data with a similarly sampled set of interview data (n=32) from Tagliamonte's York corpus from the late 1990s (Tagliamonte 1996-98). The combined data set contains 3667 mid-vowel tokens. We measured each token dynamically, with time-normalised measurements of F1 and F2 at +10% steps across the vowel trajectory (McDougall 2004). Diphthong length was measured by taking the Euclidean distance between normalized values (using Watt & Fabricius (2002)) of the first (onset) and ninth (offset) measurement of each formant (Fabricius 2007). Results were then analyzed by fitting separate mixed-effects linear models for FACE and GOAT with random intercepts for lexical root and speaker.

Our results support two main findings. First, the data indicate change toward Southern diphthongal forms, with the 2008 sample favouring longer Euclidean distances for both FACE ($p=.0016$) and GOAT ($p=.0005$). Second, our attitudinal data support Watt's (2002) and Watt and Milroy's (1999) proposals that use of monophthnogs vs. diphthongs is linked to speakers' attitudes toward the local community. For both FACE ($p=.007$) and GOAT ($p=.002$), Euclidean distance scores are inversely correlated with an index of scores from the attitudinal data measuring positive attitudes toward the local community. This attitudinal effect is in fact stronger than stylistic (word list vs. conversation) and sex effects which were not significant for either FACE and GOAT. These results, therefore, lend support to much of the above-cited literature suggesting the importance of meanings of place in shaping current sound changes in Northern UK dialects