

Mapping a Merger: Accelerated Spatial and Temporal Linguistic Change in East Anglian English

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The linguistic pressures exerted on East Anglia by neighbouring varieties have caused the dialect area to shrink significantly in recent years, resulting in a classic dialect death situation (Trudgill, 2001). Yet, the exact patterns of sound change and rates of diffusion are largely unknown.

This paper therefore returns to earlier assumptions that linguistic diffusion between south and north Suffolk, a linguistic sub-zone of East Anglia, would be gradual (Trudgill, 1974). It examines how, why, and to what extent the northern dialect area of Suffolk has resisted the long-mid vowel merger, which resulted in the attested GOAT set wherein [ou] and [ʌ] represent the contrast between, for example, ‘road’ and ‘rowed’, or ‘nose’ and ‘knows’. It considers the nature of this merger, its character vis-à-vis ongoing development through phonetic approximation and/or lexical transfer, as well as its systemic motivations (external vs. internal). Furthermore, GOAT fronting has been noted to occur in varieties of Southern British English (Kerswill & Williams, 2005) and is said to be preceded by GOOSE fronting. This paper will therefore also explore back vowel dynamics, while considering the implications for both GOOSE and GOAT fronting in a dialect where the GOAT vowel remains split, and the GOOSE vowel is historically recorded as [u].

Data from 18 speakers native to Lowestoft (north Suffolk) are drawn from phonologically controlled reading passages, and the results of acoustic analysis of normalised formant values are presented according to gender and across three age categories. Statistical analyses using Pillai scores highlight a change in progress where maintenance of the GOAT distinction is almost categorical for both older and middle speakers but lost for younger speakers. GOOSE fronting is most advanced in younger speakers, while those speakers who maintain two distinct GOAT vowels are shown to treat these differently with regard to GOAT fronting. Results suggest the rapid loss of this distinction has occurred across just one generation, coinciding with the collapse of the town’s fishing industry.

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