

## Embryonic Variants in New Zealand English Sound Changes<sup>1</sup>

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When Peter Trudgill carried out his 1968 urban dialect survey of Norwich he noticed a labio-dental approximant pronunciation of /r/ which he thought at the time was purely idiosyncratic. In his 1983 follow-up of this study he found this variant had become widespread and far from being a speech defect, the early examples of this variant turned out to be manifestations of a sound change in progress (Trudgill 1988).

When I read Trudgill's account of this it reminded me of the time in 1983 when Margaret Maclagan and I began our investigation into the EAR/AIR merger, analysing the speech of over 100 Christchurch 14-year olds. We thought the merger was a recent one so to test this hypothesis we also recorded elderly people in a retirement home and got them to read the same word lists and sentences as the 14-year olds. Out of 11 people with an average age of 85 we were most surprised to find five who merged either one or two of the word pairs (Gordon and Maclagan 1989, Maclagan and Gordon 1996).

At the time this raised an interesting question. Was it possible that these old people had changed their speech patterns during their lives and somehow picked up the merger from the young people? In 1983 our research results showed that 25% of the adolescents had used merged variants (Gordon and Maclagan 1989). However another possibility is that, as with Trudgill's findings in Norwich with the pronunciation of /r/, there were people using merged variants of these diphthongs long before anyone had ever noticed them. This could mean that Peter Trudgill's 1968 speakers and our old speakers in 1983 were producing what we have called 'embryonic variants' of the future changes.

More recently we have been able to investigate this suggestion further, using an archive of recordings collected in the 1940s by the Mobile

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on work done in the project on the Origins of NZ English which has been funded for two years by the Public Good Science Fund. It is very much the product of joint effort. In particular, the phonetic analysis was done by Peter Trudgill, Margaret Maclagan, and Chris Bartlett. David Maclagan also assisted and Gillian Lewis has been responsible for the database. The genealogical information was provided by Sandra Quick.

Disc Recording Unit of the NZ Broadcasting Service. Here we have recordings of over 250 elderly people born between the 1850s and the 1890s in small towns of certain areas of New Zealand. This collection of recordings is known as the Mobile Unit archive. (For a fuller description, see Lewis 1996.)

We also have data collected at the University of Canterbury from 1994–7 consisting of over 200 individuals in a structured sample, with equal numbers of men and women in two age groups (20–30) and (45–60); this data includes both casual and word-list speech. This gives us information about present day New Zealand speech and I will call it the 1990s Archive. (For a fuller description, see Gordon and MacLagan 1995.)

Using our initial example of the EAR/AIR merger, I can report that in an analysis by Peter Trudgill of 77 Mobile Unit speakers, seven of them had either very similar or identical realisations of some EAR/AIR diphthongs. The speakers analysed were born between 1851 and 1880, with the exception of four who were born later than this. This result challenges our initial hypothesis whereby the present day older speakers might have changed their speech patterns in the direction of the changes in younger speakers.

Another possible explanation could be that the speakers in the Mobile Unit archive who used the merged EAR/AIR variant might have come from a common dialectal region in Britain or Ireland. However a close investigation of the origins and parentage of these speakers shows that this is not the case. Of the seven identified by Trudgill, the oldest was born in 1865 and the youngest in 1895; four were born between 1874 and 1878. Four came from different North Island towns and three were from the South Island. Their parentage was also very diverse — Scotland, Ireland, London, the Channel Islands, Australia. One had an English father and a Maori mother.

The analysis of the Mobile Unit archive material has shown us that some of the characteristic features of New Zealand English (NZE) today were not present in the speech of these people born in the second half of the 19th century. Yet while we can state this as a general rule, we now also know that there were a few exceptions, and occasionally we can find very early instances of features which are characteristic of present-day New Zealand speech. Because these are always so few in number it has been easy or convenient to dismiss them as statistically insignificant and to concentrate on the general trends. In this paper I am reporting the results of an exercise whereby I took some of the changes in NZE which are very noticeable in the 1990s archive and I then searched the Mobile Unit archive to see if there were any examples of them there. In other words this has been a search for embryonic variants.

### **Centralised /ɪ/**

An obvious feature of present day NZE is the centralised /ɪ/ (Gordon and Deverson 1998, Bell 1997). As a result of our research we can confidently

say this was not a feature of early NZE. In the 1990s archive it was used by 80% of the speakers aged 40-60 and 90% of the speakers aged 20-30. In contrast, out of 77 Mobile Unit archive speakers, Trudgill identified seven who each had a few tokens of centralised /ɪ/. The numbers were not large — two speakers had two tokens only; for example, Mr Dixon had two tokens, both on the word *pig*.

### **/ə/ in the unstressed position**

Those complaining about the earliest manifestations of the 'colonial twang' in NZ would often give as examples pronunciations like 'systum' for *system*, 'ut' for *it* or 'horsuz' for *horses* (Gordon 1983:35-36). In the Mobile Unit archive analysed so far, 28.5% of speakers have a noticeable centralised vowel in the unstressed position, two speakers (2.5%) varied between /ə/ and /ɪ/ and the remaining 69% have a relatively front /ɪ/.

### **Centralised raised rounded /ɜ/**

This is a feature of present day NZE where words with the NURSE vowel are so centralised, raised and rounded that they can sometimes be confused with /u/. For example, children in a Christchurch primary school have been heard singing a skipping song: 'Julie Temple is a star...'. These children are too young to have heard of the 1930s child star Shirley Temple, and her name has been converted to *Julie* because of the degree of rounding and raising of the /ɜ/ vowel (Gordon and Deverson 1998:43). In the 1990s archive 90% of the speakers have a central close or front of centre close vowel ([e:]). Trudgill found 12 speakers in the Mobile Unit archive with some examples of this feature. As with the centralised /ɪ/, some speakers sometimes had only one or two tokens of this modern NZE variant.

### **Vocalisation of post-vocalic /l/**

Among the consonants in present day NZE we find the vocalisation of post-vocalic /l/. Someone writing to the Christchurch *Press* in 1995 complained of seeing a notice for 'warnuts for sale' and hearing people say 'mook' for *milk*. (10/2/95). Out of 3,320 tokens of /l/ which have been analysed in the 1990s archive 60% were vocalised. Chris Bartlett analysed a random sample of 13 speakers from Otago in the Mobile Unit archive and found one speaker with examples of vocalised post-vocalic /l/ — Mr Templeton born in 1887 vocalised 13 out of 77 tokens (17%).<sup>2</sup> While undertaking an acoustic study of the short front vowels Margaret Maclagan happened to notice that another speaker, Mrs Hamilton, born in 1877, vocalised /l/ on the words *saddle*, *paddle*, and *original*. It is not known if she vocalised /l/ on other words, as this has not been studied.

<sup>2</sup> The tokens of vocalised /l/ found by Bartlett were checked acoustically by Margaret Maclagan.

### **High rising terminal contours**

High rising terminal contours have been widely reported in NZE since the 1970s (Allan 1990, Britain 1992, Britain and Newman 1992). Chris Bartlett analysed 21 randomly selected South Island speakers in the Mobile Unit archive for this feature and found one person with significant usage and one who used a few HRTs at the beginning of her interview.

### **Grown/grow-en**

My final example is the case of the pronunciation of verbs with past-participles ending in *-own* — *grown, known, flown, shown, blown*, etc. This ending occurs in NZE as a monosyllabic variant (OWN) or as a disyllabic variant (OWEN). Margaret Maclagan and I have been studying this analogical change for some time (Maclagan and Gordon 1998). From data collected from a number of different sources, we have found that the New Zealanders are remarkably evenly divided in their usage. One study of speakers aged 18-80 produced the extraordinary result of 574 speakers using the OWN variant and 574 using the OWEN variant. Three different attitude tests have shown that those who use the OWN variant and those who use the OWEN variant are equally convinced that their particular pronunciation is the correct one.

David Maclagan searched the transcripts of 117 speakers in the Mobile Unit Archive for examples of *-own* participles. He found 60 speakers from 21 different towns using these participles in their recordings, and of these, 10 used disyllabic variants. Interestingly, of the few who used the OWEN form, none did so exclusively. For example, Mr Partridge who was born in Cromwell in 1895 and spent all his life there, had four instances of OWEN and one of OWN.

### **Discussion**

We have checked the ancestry of every speaker who used a so-called embryonic variant and as a result we have had to rule out any explanation which involved a common dialectal factor. The parents of these elderly New Zealand born speakers came from all over the British Isles, and some were born in Australia or New Zealand.

This therefore, raises some interesting questions. One question is whether we should be attaching any significance at all to these early rare examples. Is it even appropriate to call them 'embryonic variants' when they could possibly be just coincidental occurrences in the highly variable speech of the time? Are we making significant links where there is really just chance and coincidence? Perhaps we would find occasional variants which are different from the norm in any person's speech if it were analysed closely enough.

If the examples described here are indeed embryonic variants this raises the question of how they managed to survive. A possible answer could lie in the variability which we now know existed in early New Zealand speech. (See Trudgill et al. 1998, Woods 1997.) Trudgill found in the Mobile

Unit archive examples of dialect mixing that do not occur in the British Isles. He also found variability between speakers who had grown up together and gone to school together and he found variability within the speech of individuals (Trudgill et al. 1998). So perhaps the variability itself acted as a camouflage, concealing individual variants and rendering them unremarkable, and so enabling their survival and eventual victory.

Another question which should be asked is why these particular variants went on to develop into mainstream NZE while others which we know were also there among the older New Zealand speakers, died out. One example is h-dropping which was so constantly condemned by school teachers around the turn of the century (Gordon 1983) and which we know from David Maclagan's recent analysis was present in the Mobile Unit archive (Maclagan 1998). H-dropping, however, is not a characteristic of present-day NZE to any significant extent. (For further discussion, see Holmes and Bell 1992.) A surprising finding from Trudgill's analysis of 77 Mobile Unit speakers is that most of them were rhotic to a greater or lesser degree. He found only eight (10.5%) who were not rhotic at all, 21 (31%) who were slightly or barely rhotic, 19 (25%) who were 50-60% rhotic, and 24 (31%) who were fully or very strongly rhotic. Rhoticity, therefore, seems to have been prevalent all over New Zealand where now it is just associated with Southland and parts of Otago (Bartlett 1992). Trudgill also found many examples of older speakers in the Mobile Unit archive with the unrounded LOT vowel — 22 out of 77 speakers, with another 11 using it occasionally. This is also not a feature of present-day NZE.

A possible answer to the question of survival is to say that features that are not closely associated with any one regional or social group are more likely to survive whereas variants directly associated with a dialect or social group are more likely to disappear during dialect levelling. This has been the finding of Paul Kerswill and Anne Williams in their research in Milton Keynes where they noted that marked regional forms were disfavoured (Kerswill and Williams 1994). It has also been found by Erik Thomas in his study of the rural and metropolitan dialect in the Anglo population of Texas. The monophthongal /ai/ which is a strong marker of Texas identity in rural areas is declining in metropolitan areas of Texas where there has been a large influx of migrants from the north (Thomas 1997).

The features described above which did not survive in New Zealand are indeed strongly associated with certain dialect or social class groups. H-dropping is confined to low status speech in all areas of England and Wales except East Anglia and Northumberland. Rhoticity is a strong regional and social marker, and in the 19th century would have been associated with all forms of Scottish and Irish speech and lower status accents in the Northwest and Southwest of England. The unrounded LOT vowel would have been stereotypically associated with Southern Irish English and rural dialects in the West Country and East Anglia. On the other hand, the features which survived and became victorious are not strongly associated with any

particular region or social class — centralised /ɪ/, raised rounded /ɜ/, /ə/ in unstressed syllables, vocalised /ɪ/, HRTs, the disyllabic pronunciation of grown etc.

If examples of early seeds of NZE that I have described are indeed embryonic variants, then there are implications for us in our study of NZE today because we could also argue that in present-day NZE there could be embryonic variants of future changes, if only we could identify them.

In our 1990s archive we have found features that are not yet commented on by the general public. These include the use of f/v substitutions for θ/ð (Campbell and Gordon 1996). My son aged 27, who trained as a lawyer and a secondary school teacher, says /wiv/ for with, though he does not know he does it. We know that there have always been variants of with in NZE — /wiv/ and /wiθ/ — so perhaps this is why another variable can be tolerated. Other examples of possible embryonic variants today could include affrication in words like *street* and *dream* and *tree*: /stʃrit/ /dʒrim/ /tʃri/. We can also find a centralised /ʊ/ in some contexts. My youngest daughter aged 17 and her female friends all use a central /ʊ/ in the word *good*, though not in other words with /ʊ/ such as *look*, *cook*, *book*. These are all features which are worth watching.

After watching the funeral of Princess Diana on television, members of the research team working on the origins of NZE project at the University of Canterbury were very excited by Tony Blair's pronunciation of *known* as 'know-en', wondering whether this was a possible embryonic variant of changes to come in RP. We were somewhat deflated to discover that he had lived in Australia for a time!

### **Conclusion**

The study of changes in NZE made possible by the preservation of early recordings of old New Zealand speakers has revealed some interesting information. We now know something that we did not know before, which is that there is occasionally very early evidence of later developments. We know that these early instances of NZE features occur in the speech of men and women in the North Island and the South Island — in different places and different times — and there seems to be no common British regional factor in the parentage of those who used them.

If they are indeed embryonic variants, then I think this could influence sociolinguistic methodology. It suggests that we should be careful in our sociolinguistic research today to note the unusual and exceptional as well as the common trends. It is always possible that these might be embryonic variants, giving us an early glimpse of what NZE might sound like in the future .

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