

t-flapping in present-day Northern English: implications for sociophonological change

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This paper is a present-day analysis of t-flapping and voicing patterns found in intervocalic position in the accent of Blackburn, Lancashire. This process, whereby /t/ is realised as voiced, or as flap between vowels (e.g. *better* is realised as [berəʊ] rather than [betəʊ]), is found in speakers throughout the speech community. The paper's main aim is to present a quantitative apparent-time analysis of the t-flapping situation in present-day Blackburn English, in order to better understand the relationship of sound change over time in a variety where the process is still highly variable. A secondary aim is to link these patterns with other related phenomena such as the t-to-r rule and how the lack of which in Blackburn may be linked to the fact that the accent is still rhotic. The data, taken from sociolinguistic interviews with 12 local speakers, is auditorily coded, and the focus in this paper is on the three primary variants: fully realised [t], the flap or voiced variant, and glottal replacement.

Although t-flapping in English is almost always reported with reference to American varieties, it is clear that this variant as spoken in Lancashire has existed for a long time, and is certainly not an adopted innovation from outside. This is supported by historical data from Minkova (2014), who reports evidence of flapping/voicing in England as early as the 15th century. More recent studies of Southern British English have shown younger RP and near-RP speakers to be employing flaps more frequently as an alternative to the glottal stop (Jell 2016, Baugh 2017). However, the data from Blackburn demonstrates that, as in line with Minkova's evidence, this is not a new variant and, in fact, seems to be on its way out, with younger speakers flapping at much lower rates than older speakers (Figure 1). Instead, younger speakers are exhibited much higher rates of the glottal stop, as found throughout the UK. We also gain an insight into the contexts in which flapping cannot occur here e.g. after long vowels, giving us an insight into the potential progression it took in American English.

Under a framework in which synchronic and diachronic processes are entwined, such as the phonological life cycle (Bermúdez-Otero 2015) a process starts by applying at lower levels of the grammar, over time advancing to progressively higher levels. The life cycle makes opposing predictions the rates of lenition by glottalling, and the rates by flapping, should occur in different kinds of flapping environments. This is because of the levels of the derivation in which they occur. For flapping to occur, the /t/ must be intervocalic: in a word like *bet ter*, the /t/ is in the required environment at the stem, word and phrase levels, but in *got it*, the /t/ is in the required environment only at the phrase level, therefore we expect more flapping in *better* than *got it*. This point is underlined further in the data with intermediate category *getting*, whereby the /t/, which is intervocalic in the word and phrase levels, but not in the stem level, shows lower rates of flapping than monomorphemic *better* (Figure 2). This is borne out in the data from the older speakers, who exhibit the vast majority of their flapped tokens in monomorphemes, over intervocalic bimorphemic words. For glottalling, the prediction is the other way around. /t/-glottalling in British English affects /t/ in coda position in the first instance, including word-final instances such as *got*. In more advanced dialects and younger speakers, this advances to wherever /t/ is non-initial in the foot. Thus, glottalling in *better* is reported as occurring less frequently than in *got it* (Foulkes & Docherty 1999) and sociolinguistically is more stigmatised (Foulkes & Docherty 2007), which likely reflects that this is a more advanced stage of the change.

The results are also analysed in light of reported sound variation in other Northern dialects, with a focus on the *t-to-r* rule (*gerroff* for *get off*; Honeybone 2014). This variant is reported in Liverpool (Clark & Watson 2011), Newcastle (Buchstaller et al. 2013), Yorkshire (Broadbent 2008) and Manchester. Blackburn speakers do not tend to exhibit this variant, and this is discussed in light of the variety also not showing a tapped-[r] variant, which Honeybone (2014) states one of the driving forces behind the reanalysis of /t/ in such words to be realised as [r]. This is also discussed in light of Blackburn being a rhotic dialect of English: speakers of all ages maintain post-vocalic /r/ in words such as *car*, *farm* (although this may be weakening in younger speakers; Turton 2015). The links between these potentially interconnected processes are discussed, as well as the implications for the phonology and possible micro-typologies of /t/ and /r/-related phenomena.

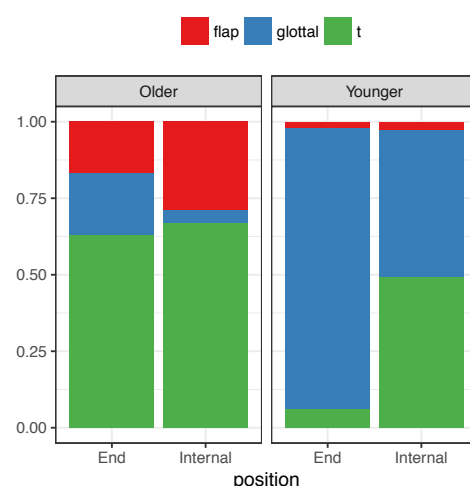


Figure 1: flapping at end of word and internal position across age groups

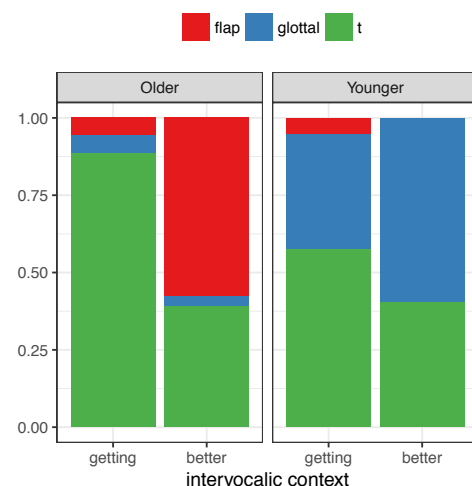


Figure 2: The distribution of word-medial /t/ variants in monomorphemes e.g. *better*, vs. suffixed forms e.g. *getting*.

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