

Sound change, priming, salience

Producing and perceiving variation
in Liverpool English

Marten Juskan

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Intentions – what this study is about	1
1.2	Restrictions – what this study is not about	3
1.3	Structure of the book	4
2	A brief history of Liverpool and Scouse	7
2.1	The first 600 years	7
2.2	19 th century	10
2.3	20 th century	14
2.3.1	Enregisterment and the ‘Scouse industry’	14
2.3.2	Decline	16
2.3.3	Regeneration	19
2.4	21 st century – outlook	21
2.5	Summary	23
3	Variables	25
3.1	General remarks	25
3.2	Supragsegmentals	26
3.3	Consonants	27
3.3.1	/ŋ(g)/	28
3.3.2	Lenition (of /k/)	29
3.4	Vowels	32
3.4.1	happy	33
3.4.2	NURSE – SQUARE	35
3.5	Summary	38
4	A few words on salience and exemplar theory	39
4.1	Salience	39
4.1.1	Salience and circularity	39
4.1.2	Cognitive vs. social salience	41
4.1.3	Salience in this study	43

Contents

4.2	Exemplar theory	47
4.2.1	Basic principles	47
4.2.2	Application in (socio-)linguistics	49
4.2.3	Frequency and salience in exemplar theory	52
4.3	Summary	56
5	Interview method	57
5.1	Interview structure	57
5.2	Participants	59
5.3	Transcription	62
5.4	Measuring	62
5.4.1	Consonants	62
5.4.2	Vowels	65
5.4.3	Normalisation	66
5.5	Phonological context	74
5.6	Statistical analysis	76
6	Vowel production	81
6.1	happy	82
6.1.1	F1 (happy)	82
6.1.2	F2 (happy)	93
6.1.3	Synthesis and Pillai scores (happy)	104
6.2	NURSE	108
6.2.1	F1 (NURSE)	108
6.2.2	F2 (NURSE)	118
6.2.3	Synthesis and Pillai scores (NURSE)	131
7	Consonant production	141
7.1	/ŋ(g)/	142
7.1.1	Overview	142
7.1.2	Phonological context	142
7.1.3	Style and gender	145
7.1.4	Age and social class	147
7.1.5	Style shifting	150
7.2	/k/	151
7.2.1	Overview	151
7.2.2	Phonological context	153
7.2.3	Style and gender	155
7.2.4	Style and social class	157

7.2.5	Age and gender	159
7.2.6	Age and social class	162
7.2.7	Social class and gender	164
7.2.8	Style shifting	165
8	Awareness, comments, evaluation	171
8.1	Scouse and ‘Liverpoolness’	171
8.1.1	Accent and identity	171
8.1.2	Distinctness, geographical spread, and ‘plastic’ Scousers	172
8.1.3	In the north, but not of it?	174
8.2	Features of Scouse	177
8.2.1	Geographical variation	177
8.2.2	Suprasegmentals	178
8.2.3	Phonological variables	179
8.3	Evolution and evaluation of Scouse	185
8.3.1	Old speakers	185
8.3.2	Middle-aged speakers	188
8.3.3	Young speakers	191
9	Discussion (production)	197
9.1	happy: Indicator (of northernness)	197
9.1.1	Overall age differences	197
9.1.2	Gender and class	198
9.1.3	Style shifting and awareness	200
9.1.4	Classification	201
9.2	NURSE: Marker to stereotype and back again	201
9.2.1	Overall age differences	201
9.2.2	Gender and social class	204
9.2.3	Style shifting and awareness	205
9.2.4	Classification	208
9.3	Velar nasal plus: Indicator with prestige option	208
9.3.1	Age, class, and gender	208
9.3.2	Style shifting and awareness	210
9.3.3	Classification	211
9.4	Lenition: From indicator to stereotype	212
9.4.1	Age	212
9.4.2	Gender and class	213
9.4.3	Style shifting	214
9.4.4	Awareness and attitudes	216

Contents

9.4.5	Classification	217
9.5	Summary	218
10	Experiment design	221
10.1	Stimuli	221
10.1.1	Stimuli sentences and frequency of keywords	221
10.1.2	Vowel stimuli	225
10.1.3	Consonant stimuli	226
10.2	Presentation	228
10.2.1	Online platform	228
10.2.2	Reaction times	231
10.3	Participants	232
10.4	Statistical analysis	235
11	Perception results	237
11.1	happy	238
11.1.1	Overview	238
11.1.2	Prime	239
11.1.3	Position of carrier word	240
11.1.4	Geographical distance	241
11.1.5	Frequency	242
11.1.6	Age	244
11.2	NURSE	245
11.2.1	Overview	245
11.2.2	Prime	245
11.2.3	Position of carrier word	247
11.2.4	Stimulus order	248
11.3	/ŋ(g)/	251
11.3.1	Overview	251
11.3.2	Prime	252
11.3.3	Phonological context	253
11.3.4	Age	255
11.4	/k/	256
11.4.1	Overview	256
11.4.2	Prime and social class	257
11.4.3	Phonological context	261
11.4.4	Geographical distance	263
11.4.5	Frequency	265

12 Discussion (Perception)	267
12.1 Priming and salience	267
12.1.1 Salient vs. non-salient variables	267
12.1.2 Degree of priming and accuracy	268
12.1.3 Salience as likelihood of remembrance	269
12.2 Social factors	272
12.2.1 Social class	272
12.2.2 Gender	273
12.2.3 Age	274
12.2.4 Geographical distance	276
12.3 Non-social factors	277
12.3.1 Time held in memory	277
12.3.2 Stimulus order	279
12.3.3 Phonological environment	280
12.4 Issues and limitations	283
12.4.1 The problem of velar nasal plus	283
12.4.2 Comparability with previous research	285
12.4.3 The issue of frequency	286
12.4.4 Size of the priming effect	287
12.5 Direction of priming	287
12.5.1 The problem of replicating priming experiments	287
12.5.2 Hay et al.'s explanation for inverted effects	289
12.5.3 Assimilation and contrast effects	290
12.6 Summary and implications	293
13 Conclusion	295
Appendix A: Questionnaire	299
Appendix B: Reading passage	303
Appendix C: Word list	305
Appendix D: Stimuli for perception test	307
References	309

3 Variables

3.1 General remarks

Whatever the precise details of its evolution, in Liverpool developed what Trudgill calls “an accent rather more ‘modern’ than that of its hinterland” (Trudgill 1999: 70) and that he describes as being “well known to most British people, and very distinctive”. For instance, Montgomery (2007a) found ‘Scouse’ to be the dialect area most often delimited and labelled by lay participants in a map drawing task. Scouse also turned out to be the most stigmatised of the language varieties mentioned by said participants (cf. Montgomery 2007a: 194 and 254). Furthermore, participants provided more linguistic characteristics for Scouse than for any other dialect area, indicating that Scouse (along with Geordie) has a higher cultural salience than most other varieties in England. Subjects commented on a wide array of (stereotypical) features, including the lexicon (‘calm down’), prosody (‘sing song’) and phonetics (cf. Montgomery 2007b: 180–181). Crowley (2012: 15) also emphasises the salience of Scouse when he writes that “(...) in Britain and Ireland at least, Liverpool and Liverpudlians are most widely recognized by their association with a distinct form of spoken language”.

Scouse is “essentially based on [the accents] of the surrounding areas and has many similarities with those of the Central Lancashire and Northwest Midlands areas (...)” (Trudgill 1999: 70). Thus, it generally belongs to the northern branch of English English, without being a prototypical specimen. Wales (2006: 18) writes that Merseyside is a “‘transition’ [zone] between Northern and Midland dialect speech” and Trudgill (1999: 72) claims that Scouse is in some respects as southern as it is northern. Much of its distinctiveness is due to phonetic rather than phonemic divergence from the surrounding varieties. Knowles (1973) describes Scouse as being phonologically North(west)ern but phonetically Anglo Irish (cf. also Knowles 1978: 80; but see §2.2 concerning Irish dominance in the dialect mix).

The only comprehensive description of Scouse as a whole so far is Knowles (1973), which is based on interview data from two Liverpool electoral wards – Aigburth to the south and Vauxhall to the north of Liverpool city centre. At least

from the perspective of the time of writing, there are a number of difficulties with Knowles' account. Parts of his thesis are based exclusively on native speaker introspection (for instance the whole section on what he calls "setting and voice quality", cf. Knowles 1973: 102). Also, he seems to embrace some rather strange notions for a linguist, e.g. he claims that "no-one with any local knowledge would attempt to [make quantitative statements about Liverpool speech in general]" since "no sample, however unbiased, would allow one to make inferences about the Chinese and coloured communities of Liverpool 8, or of the University people of Abercromby" (Knowles 1973: 3). It is not clear whether he thinks this is because he interviewed people from only two electoral wards (which would be fairly obvious and not really worth pointing out) or because he really thinks that for some reason it is not possible to have a representative sample of Liverpool speech in general (which would be an odd thing to say, especially for a sociolinguist). Occasionally, he even slips into clearly prescriptivist vocabulary, for instance when he describes the voice quality of Scouse as being "undeniably poor and ugly, as these terms are normally understood" (Knowles 1973: 116).

That said, Knowles is aware of some of these shortcomings, calling his description of the Scouse vowel system "admittedly speculative" and "put forward extremely tentatively" (Knowles 1973: 111). He also explains that – originally having intended to apply Labovian methods in his thesis – he found it problematic to identify and analyse socially significant variables in Scouse, and, consequently, he himself does not consider his study "a contribution to socio-linguistics as such" (cf. Knowles 1973: 1). Notwithstanding these problems, his work is, as mentioned above, the most complete description of Scouse available and any study concerned with the variety of Liverpool must start out from Knowles' PhD thesis. In the general overview of Scouse characteristics that follows, this project will do the same. The four variables subjected to closer analysis in this study are discussed in more detail in §3.3.1, §3.3.2, §3.4.1, and §3.4.2 respectively.

3.2 Supragsegmentals

Knowles (1973) talks at length about Scouse intonation and indeed it is a feature which rather quickly strikes the outsider when first talking to a Liverpudlian. Several of my own participants (see §8.2.2) also mentioned "a lilt" as one of the distinguishing characteristics. Wales remarks that although "[supra-segmentals] are such readily distinctive markers of regional origin (...) they have been quite seriously under-researched" (2006: 201). This is certainly true. However, supra-segmentals are not the focus of this study either, so suffice it to say that "[t]he

intonation of Liverpool speech differs notably in some respects from that in England as a whole” but that “[e]xactly how much they differ is not easy to assess” (Knowles 1973: 221) and sometimes more a matter of relative frequency than real difference (cf. Knowles 1973: 176).

According to Knowles, at least working-class intonation is “undoubtedly Celtic in origin”, with “Irish influence [being] much more likely than Welsh” (Knowles 1973: 221–222) and “the origin of middle class Merseyside intonation [being] more obscure” (Knowles 1973: 222–223). Just as for the segments, he claims that Liverpool intonation is, in general, “phonologically North-Western English, but largely phonetically Anglo-Irish” (Knowles 1973: 225) – a claim that has to be based on a ‘phonology of intonation’, which indeed he sketches in his thesis. The reader is referred to Knowles (1973: 174–226) for details.

Voicing, says Knowles, is “relatively slow to start up at the beginning of an utterance, and tends to die away just before the end” (1973: 246), meaning that voiced and voiceless sounds are mostly distinguished by the duration of the preceding sound – which is in fact the most important cue in English (cf., for instance, Hogan & Rozsypal 1980). Knowles claims that “Scouse differs markedly from the rest of North Midland English” in this respect and “is not quite the same as RP” (1973: 246), although he can only be talking about voicing starting rather late, since he – correctly – says elsewhere that RP has devoicing (in final stops) as well (cf. 1973: 114).

3.3 Consonants

The repertoire of Scouse consonants is “phonologically identical to most other varieties of English English” (Watson 2007: 351) but the phonetic realisation is often not. Just like the Lancashire dialects it is derived from, Scouse was still rhotic in the 19th century, but it has now lost all traces of this rhoticism (cf. Knowles 1997: 149) and is just like RP in this respect. *Pre-vocalic* /r/ is often realised as a flap in broad Scouse – especially in intervocalic position, but also in onset clusters (cf. Knowles 1973: 107 and 329–330; Watson 2007: 352). Contrary to RP, however, the realisation as [ɾ] is “a non-prestige feature in Liverpool” and therefore avoided by middle-class speakers (Knowles 1973: 329).

/θ/ and /ð/ can be both realised as “RP-type interdental fricatives [θ ð]” or as “Anglo-Irish [T, D] which can be post-dental or (apico-)alveolar stops” (Knowles 1973: 323). Knowles found the realisation as stops being “virtually restricted (...) to working class Catholics” and more frequent among men than women (Knowles 1973: 323–324). Watson (2007)’s female working-class speaker uses dental stops

in all positions and, interestingly, shows no signs of TH-fronting, “despite the evidence that suggests it is diffusing throughout much of the rest of the country” (cf. [Watson 2007](#): 352).

3.3.1 /ŋ(g)/

Another characteristic consonantal feature of Scouse is what is often termed ‘velar nasal plus’. Most varieties of English pronounce word-final <ng> clusters as [ŋ]. The original realisation – as “reflected in the spelling which we still use” ([Trudgill 1999](#): 58) –, however, was [ŋg]. In “Central Lancashire, Merseyside, Northwest Midlands and West Midlands” ([Trudgill 1999](#): 58) this older pronunciation prevails to this day. The area in which velar nasal plus is “a defining characteristic” ([Trudgill 1999](#): 58) contains the cities of Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool. In these places, *singer* is not pronounced [sɪŋə] but [sɪŋgə], and *long* is realised as [lɒŋg] instead of [lɒŋ] (cf. [Trudgill 1999](#): 58).

Talking about Scouse in particular, [Knowles \(1973: 293\)](#) describes [g] as “always optional” in <ng> clusters, provided it is not obligatory in RP (e.g. in words such as *longer* or *stronger*). He suggests that [g] is primarily realised word finally or prevocally, and that [ŋg] “would be odd” ([Knowles 1973: 293](#)) preceding another plosive such as in *stringed*. The *ing*-forms can also be realised with an audible [g], resulting in [ŋg]. According to [Knowles \(1973: 293\)](#), “[r]eduplicated /ŋg/-forms as in *singing* /sɪŋŋŋg/” are possible, but comparatively rare (cf. [Knowles 1973: 293](#)). This is probably mostly due to the fact that, just like in many other places of the English-speaking world, *-ing* is often realised as [ɪn] in Liverpool – [Knowles \(cf. 1973: 156\)](#) states that this is more frequently so for the present participle than the gerund.

If <ng> occurs word finally “it can be difficult to decide whether there is a final /g/ or not”. In these instances, [Knowles](#) argues, the length of the preceding nasal, rather than the acoustics of the [g] itself, seems to be an essential cue for perceiving “/ŋg/ rather than /ŋ/”. This leads [Knowles](#) to the somewhat strange statement that some cases of <ng> “sound like the Scouse /ŋg/ rather than the standard /ŋ/”, although there is “no audible /g/” ([Knowles 1973: 293](#)). This does seem odd, since the presence of [g] is the very essence of the Scouse variant. Note, however, that [Knowles 1973](#) is purely based on auditory analysis – in the cases described by [Knowles](#) there might very well have been some subtle acoustic cues of a ‘proper’ [g] that would have been revealed by methods of phonetic analysis not widely available at the time.

The more or less voluntary realisation of velar nasal plus aside, [Knowles \(1973\)](#) also presents another theory of how [ŋg] can come about in final position. He

claims that due to the “phonation pattern by which voice trails off before the end” (cf. §3.2), the (often audible) “release of the velar closure (...) sounds exactly like a weak oral [g]”, because nasal resonance has stopped (cf. Knowles 1973: 294). For words such as *anything*, *something*, *nothing* (but strangely not in the simple *thing*), Knowles (cf. 1973: 156) also found the realisation [θɪŋk], combining velar nasal plus with final devoicing (again, cf. §3.2).

Interestingly, Knowles reports that in the (mostly middle-class) district of Aigburth, the majority of the men he interviewed used [ŋ], whereas most women used [ŋg] (cf. 1973: 295) – a reversal of the familiar pattern revealed in countless sociolinguistic studies since then, according to which local forms are more common in *male* speech, whilst women tend to use more standard variants. Watson (2007: 352) also reports velar nasal plus – including reduplicated instances as in *singing* [sɪŋgɪŋg] – as a characteristic of Liverpool English (his data are taken from the speech of a 21-year-old), so apparently it is not a feature that has disappeared since the 1970s when Knowles published his thesis.

Despite the hints in Knowles (1973) that the use of [ŋg] variants might be socially stratified in Liverpool, at least with respect to gender, velar nasal plus is not counted among the salient features of Scouse. Newbrook (1999: 98) reports the spread of [ŋg] variants into West Wirral, i.e. to the other side of the river Mersey (which is a very salient natural border for many people in the area). Realisations containing a velar plosive occurred frequently, both in intervocalic and in word-final contexts. The majority of speakers did not exhibit any style shifting with this variable (although marker patterning did occur for some of them), which “suggests limited salience” of this variable in the wider Liverpool region (Newbrook 1999: 98).

3.3.2 Lenition (of /k/)

Knowles (1973: 251) explains that in Liverpool English there is an “apparent confusion of stops, plosives, affricates [and] fricatives (...)”, which he attributes to a general Scouse tendency towards ‘lax’ articulation, resulting in incomplete blocking of the air stream during the closure phase of stops (cf. Knowles 1973: 107). The technical term is lenition, from Latin *lenis*, which describes a process of phonological ‘weakening’ along a certain trajectory. As so often, there is some disagreement about the use of the term (cf. Watson 2002: 196). For the purposes of this study, I will adhere to Honeybone’s definition as a “synchronic, variable process whereby underlying plosives are realised as affricates and fricatives in certain specific prosodic and melodic environments”. He counts this process among “the clearest phonological characteristics of Modern Liverpool English” (2007: 129).

All plosives can be subject to lenition in Liverpool English (cf. Honeybone 2001: 236), but most research so far has focused on /t/ and /k/ (see, e.g., Honeybone 2001; Sangster 2001; Watson 2002; 2006). According to Honeybone (2001: 236), the possible realisations (from least lenited to most lenited) are [t, tθ/ts, θ/s, h, Ø] for /t/, and [k, kx, x, h, Ø] for /k/.

In Liverpool, all of the lenited variants of /t/ that are possible actually occur (in various phonological contexts), but for /k/ only the realisations [kx] and [x] are attested (cf. Honeybone 2001: 242). It should be added that the fricative realisation of /k/ is not always [x] – [ç] is also possible. The two allophones are in complementary distribution for most speakers, and phonologically conditioned: [ç] follows high front monophthongs and raising diphthongs (*week* [wi:ç], *like* [laɪç]), whereas velar (or uvular) fricatives occurs in the remaining contexts (*back* [bax], *dock* [dɒχ], cf. Watson 2007: 353). As a result of this process, words such as *matter* and *lock* can sound more like [mæsə] and [lɒkx] or [lɒx], in the last case forming a pair of homophones with the Scots word *loch* (cf. Trudgill 1999: 73). Note that Knowles (1973) talks about an *apparent* confusion, though, hinting at the fact that, while becoming more alike, a phonologically plosive sound does not usually merge completely phonetically with the respective affricate or fricative. At least as far as the alveolar plosives are concerned the three ‘cardinal’ categories nevertheless remain distinct (cf. Knowles 1973: 327 and 252–253).

Based on his 1973 data, Knowles found that the majority of Liverpoolians used “stops with incomplete closure” at least every now and then and many apparently even realised lenited stops in rather formal speaking styles. He therefore concludes that lenition, though originally probably a working-class feature, has also taken hold in middle-class speech. He nevertheless finds that – not surprisingly – lenited variants are more frequent in working-class speech and, with respect to /t/ at least, are also more common among women. This relates back to §3.3.1 in that it represents another deviation from the common gender pattern (cf. 1973: 325–327).

The frequency of the individual variants depends mostly on the phonological environment, with, for instance, the fricatives being most frequent in “word-final and foot-medial positions”, while other contexts are inhibitive to the use of lenited variants (cf. Honeybone 2007: 130; for a discussion of inhibiting environments see Honeybone 2001). Especially in intervocalic environments lenition is phonetically motivated, which is the reason why it occurs frequently in this context, both in typological terms and in Liverpool English in particular (cf. Honeybone 2001: 230 and 243).

The history of lenition is more complex than that of other features. Hickey (1996) claims that lenition was first transferred from Irish Gaelic to Irish Eng-

lish and then taken to Liverpool by the Irish migrants in the 19th century. The problem with this account, according to Honeybone (2007), is that the patterning of Liverpool lenition is not the same as that of the ‘initial mutations’ in Irish Gaelic. As the name implies, the latter only occur in morpheme-initial segments, whereas lenition in Scouse – though possible and not infrequent in initial position – is much more typical word-medially and -finally. What is more, glides and nasals are also affected in Gaelic, but only stops are lenited in Liverpool English (cf. Honeybone 2007: 131). The *t*-spirantisation attested in southern varieties of Irish English that turns /t/ into [θ] is very similar in patterning but still “distinct from the affricate-spirantisation of Liverpool lenition” (Honeybone 2007: 132). Honeybone concludes that

(...) the small amounts of plosive lenition that do exist in current forms of Hiberno-English provided some push towards spirantisation, along with the other minor affrications or spirantisations in the input dialects, and that these were developed, following an endogenous pathway of change, by those who formed Liverpool English (2007: 131).

At least parts of the lenition processes in Liverpool are thus “endogenously innovated” (Honeybone 2007: 130) and the phenomenon was not an ‘off the shelf’ feature readily available in one or several of the varieties that contributed to the formation of Scouse (unlike, for instance, non-rhoticity or the realisation of /θ, ð/ as ‘Anglo-Irish stops’). There was clearly influence from Irish English and maybe also some other varieties such as London English which in its present form contains a certain amount of *t*-affrication and might have done so in the 19th century already (cf. Honeybone 2007: 132).

“The full patterning of Liverpool lenition”, however, constitutes “a creative act”, performed by “the young generations of young Liverpoolians who were forming or focusing the koine” (Honeybone 2007: 132). It was thus not the result of levelling towards one of the input varieties but “a novel, divergent development” (Honeybone 2007: 132). As a result, the Scouse type of lenition is not only special in its precise patterning, but also “unique among varieties of English in its extent” (Honeybone 2007: 132). Honeybone (2007: 130) explains that although spirantisation and affrication processes are not unknown in other forms of English, “no other (...) variety exhibits so much” (Honeybone 2007: 130). This is certainly one of the main reasons for the very high salience of the feature and its being part of the Scouse stereotype. In the case of /k/, which this book will focus on, this is clearly aided by the fact that [x] is extremely rare among English varieties.

Somewhat surprisingly, /k/ lenition does not figure prominently in what Honeybone & Watson (2013) call the ‘Contemporary Humorous Localised Dialect Literature’ (essentially the *Lern Yerself Scouse* series). A possible explanation is that it is not a straightforward task to represent [x] with the help of the ordinary Latin alphabet. This cannot be the only reason, however, since lenition in other stops is also not represented in these booklets, despite the fact that there are orthographic representations for doing so. Honeybone & Watson (2013) hypothesise that “speakers are not very clearly aware of the existence of the phenomenon” because it is (a) a comparatively recent, and (b) a sub-phonemic feature which does not entail the collapse of categories (cf. Honeybone & Watson 2013: 329–331). Their conclusion is that /k/ lenition is “non-salient” (Honeybone & Watson 2013: 333), but it should be noted that most of the Scouse ‘dictionaries’ date from the 1960s already. Most other studies support the idea that lenition is a highly salient feature.

For instance, lenition of /k/ had not (yet) spread to neighbouring West Wirral in 1980: Newbrook (1999: 97) recorded (heavily) fricated variants of this phoneme in only 8% of cases. In contrast to velar nasal plus, Liverpool lenition had thus not been taken over by speakers in West Wirral. The most probable explanation for the rejection of lenited variants is the stigma – which presupposes salience – attached to them (while [ŋg] variants are largely below the radar). Further evidence for the salience of lenited /k/ variants can be found in Watson & Clark 2015. The authors ran a perception experiment where subjects had to rate speech samples representing different regional accents. Since they were measuring perceivers’ reactions in real-time it was possible to tease apart the impact that individual features had on the overall rating. Occurrence of /k/ lenition caused a significant drop in the status rating of the speaker, which not only corroborates that this variable is salient (i.e. it was noticed), but also that it carries social meaning (low status).

3.4 Vowels

As explained in §3.3, the Liverpool consonant system is phonologically identical to that of other Northern varieties or even English English in general. Similarly, Scouse vowels have much in common with other Northern varieties in England.

Liverpool is north of the most important and probably also best known isogloss in England and so has the same vowel in words of the STRUT and FOOT lexical sets. The most typical (and at least in working-class speech by far the most frequent) realisation is [ʊ]. Many middle-class speakers, however, tend to keep

the two sets distinct. This does not necessarily mean that middle-class speakers have [ʌ] in STRUT words. Many speakers content themselves with “merely making the vowel slightly different” (Knowles 1973: 284) and actual realisations usually range from a very slightly centralised [ʊ] to [ə]. Some confusion as to which vowel should be used in which words exists, and hypercorrections and mistakes occur (Knowles 1973: 286–287 and Knowles 1978: 83).

Another issue where Scouse is in agreement with Northern English in general concerns [a] and [ɑ:]. Liverpool English has [a] instead of RP [ɑ:] in words like *last*, *grass*, *bath* etc. Middle-class speech again strives more towards RP but usually does not quite reach the target. Typically, the resulting vowel is a compromise between [a] and [ɑ:], both in terms of quality and duration and again there is some uncertainty and inconsistency (cf. Knowles 1973: 287–289 and 1978: 83–84). Watson found that [ɑ:] is generally used in START and PALM words. However, only women seem to really use the RP variant while men prefer a more fronted [a:] (cf. Watson 2007: 358) – much like the compromise described by Knowles (1973).

Words like *book* and *look* have long [u:] instead of short [ʊ] in Liverpool. Knowles (1973) described this pronunciation as being “heard in the North Midlands from Merseyside to beyond Leeds”, particularly in working-class speech (Knowles 1973: 290). Often, long [u:] is centralised or fronted. However, Watson (2007: 358) suggests this feature is fading, a statement the author of this study can (impressionistically) corroborate. Only older speakers (roughly 60 years of age or older) seem to still have this vowel in *book*. It is also mostly this age group that makes use of [u:] as a typical accent feature in the imitation task (see §5.1).

An aspect where Scouse is different from Northern English concerns the vowels in the lexical sets FACE, PRICE, GOAT, CHOICE, and MOUTH. Unlike much of Northern England, Liverpool English has diphthongs in all these words, although PRICE is occasionally monophthongised for some speakers (cf. Watson 2007: 358).

3.4.1 happy

This section is concerned with happy, i.e. the final vowel in words such as *city*, *baby*, *pretty*. With respect to RP, Harrington (2006: 441) writes that in the 1950s, the vowel used in this position was “phonetically closer to [ɪ] in KIT than to [i:] in FLEECE”, i.e. *happy* was pronounced [hæpɪ], not [hæpi]. In the late 20th century, however, happy has undergone tensing in RP. The phonetic realisation is now [i] for most speakers, and dictionaries generally use /i/ to represent this vowel. Note that the change was purely phonetic, not phonological, as [ɪ] and [i] do not distinguish meaning in the final unstressed syllables concerned. Just like

other changes in RP during this period, happy-tensing is associated with Estuary English (cf. Wells 1997). Lengthening of happy to [i:] is probably due to the fact that, (a) in English, short vowels are not permitted word-finally, and (b) happy “often occurs as the last syllable in a prosodic phrase, which is of course a primary context for synchronic lengthening (...)” (Harrington 2006: 441).

Although the standard pronunciation in modern RP is now clearly [i], some (very) conservative speakers might still adhere to the now outdated traditional (‘upper-crust’ in the terminology of Wells 1982) norm [ɪ] (as, e.g. Trudgill (1999) claims). However, using Christmas broadcasts over a period of about 50 years Harrington (cf. 2006: 452) found that even Queen Elizabeth II had participated in the shift to a certain degree and moved her happy vowel in the direction of the modern realisation.

Happy-tensing has now spread to most parts of England, with the exception of “[t]he Central North, Central Lancashire, Northwest Midlands and Central Midlands areas”. Here, the older pronunciation [ɪ] is still retained. There are a few exceptions, though, namely the port cities Liverpool, Hull and Newcastle (cf. Trudgill 1999: 62). Liverpool, or rather the whole of Merseyside (and parts of Chester) is therefore “an ‘ee’-pronouncing island surrounded by a sea of accents which do not (yet) have this feature” (Trudgill 1999: 72). In fact, it is not clear whether other areas really will follow. As a case in point, Flynn (2010) has investigated happy realisations of adolescents in Nottingham (which is part of Trudgill’s ‘sea of accents’ without happy-tensing). Not only did he find that lax happy variants were holding their ground (although it has to be said that tense [i] variants are just as common), but also that particularly working-class females even used ‘hyper-lax’ [ɛ] variants in a sizeable proportion of cases, presumably because they wish to actively distance themselves from tenser happy realisations which are seen as ‘posh’. Ultra-lax happy realisations have also been attested for Sheffield (Stoddart et al. 1999) and the Manchester area (Watts 2006).

Given the above-mentioned ‘island status’ of Liverpool, happy-tensing is a distinguishing feature in the (supra-)regional context. Like velar nasal plus, it had already spread across the Mersey to West Wirral by 1980. Newbrook (1999: 97 and 99) in fact found “Liverpool/general southern [i]” to dominate clearly, with rates of occurrence around 83% in informal speech registers, a change which was apparently driven by younger females, who were among the first to introduce Liverpool variants of this and several other variables.

Notwithstanding its usefulness as a feature that distinguishes Liverpool English from surrounding non-standard accents, happy-tensing seems to have low salience and is not the subject of comments about Scouse (in Liverpool itself,

and also in West Wirral) – possibly because it does not diverge from the modern standard.

3.4.2 NURSE – SQUARE

As another “Merseyside feature” Trudgill (1999: 72) notes the NURSE-SQUARE merger¹, i.e. the fact that words such as *fair* and *fur*, or *purr* and *pair* can be (near-) homophones in Liverpool English. In older, very traditional Liverpool English, this merger used to be centralised (cf. West 2015: 323), much like in the surrounding areas, but this is no longer the case. De Lyon (cf. 1981: 68 and 71) distinguishes 15 possible realisations for NURSE and 18 for SQUARE in her auditory analysis, but the most typical realisation (in a broad Scouse accent) for both vowels is [ɛ:] or [e:], sometimes even reaching [ɪ:] (cf. Watson 2007: 358). Honeybone (2007: 127) mentions the same range of realisations (“central and front vowels”), but calls the front vowels in particular “very robust” and gives [skwe:] *square* : [nɛ:s] *nurse* as examples.

According to Watson (2007: 358), De Lyon (1981) does not succeed in giving a (quantitative) description of how these variants are socially distributed (as they can be expected to be). Given his own reservations about the scope of his study (cf. §3.1), Knowles (1973) does not fare much better, but his thesis does contain a number of remarks about the subject. For example – although this is not very exciting news – he states that, generally, the working-class residents of Vauxhall do not make this distinction, whereas the middle-class speakers from Aigburth usually do, with the Aigburth women topping the list (which is, this time, in line with most research on gender differences that followed). The degree of difference between the two vowels can, however, be very subtle, to the point that “a gesture towards the prestige standard” (for the speaker), “may be for the hearer just another variant of a dialect vowel” (cf. Knowles 1973: 295–297).

At the same time he claims that the “typical middle-class vowel is /ɜ/ or the RP type /ɜ/”. He reports working-class speakers as using mostly [ɛ] (“further forward on the axis”) and explains that younger speakers have an even more fronted (and raised) [ɛ̊] (Knowles 1973: 271). He adds that /ɜ/ in particular “merits further study for various age-groups and in various parts of Merseyside” (1973: 320).

¹Patrick Honeybone (p.c.) is critical of calling this feature a merger because the term either implies “speakers are actively/synchronously abandoning a contrast, or at least that this is a merger which has happened in the history of Scouse [as opposed to before the formation as a new dialect]”, neither of which he considers to be true. I tend to agree, but, for reasons of convenience, have decided to follow other studies (Trudgill 1999; Watson & Clark 2013) in using the label ‘merger’ nonetheless.

Concerning possible sources of this merger, [Honeybone \(2007: 128\)](#) mentions the dialect of South Lancashire as the most obvious candidate. He attests “a similar lack of contrast” there but stresses the fact that although the same two vowels as in Liverpool are concerned, the direction of the merger is different. Where Scouse merges NURSE and SQUARE towards front vowels [ɛ:] or [e:], South Lancashire English has a central vowel, “such as [ə^ɪ: ~ ɜ:] (with residual rhoticity still an option)”.

[Honeybone \(2007\)](#) also lists a number of studies reporting similar mergers in several Irish varieties. [Wells \(1982\)](#), for instance, tells us that Belfast English has a merger very similar to that of Scouse, realising *fair*, *fir*, *fur* all as [fɛ:ɪ]. [Harris \(cf. 1985: 48\)](#) describes a merger comparable to the one in South Lancashire for urban speakers of Lagan Valley (in Northern Ireland). The vowel used is a central [ɜ:] (his examples are [dɜ:ɪ] *dare*, and [stɜ:ɪ] *stair*). Talking about ‘fashionable Dublin English’ [Hickey \(1999\)](#) asserts that NURSE and SQUARE have the possible realisations [nə^ɪs] and [skwə^ɪ] respectively. [Honeybone \(2007: 128\)](#) points out that these are statements about current (or comparatively recent) stages of the respective dialects and that it is somewhat speculative to assume that “these patterns can be extrapolated to the varieties of Hiberno-English which were spoken in Liverpool at the time of koineisation”. In fact, given the intense and long-lasting contacts between Liverpool and Ireland it is just as possible that the merger actually crossed the Irish Sea westwards instead of eastwards.

What these reports do show, however, is that “the pre-*r* vowels in these words are susceptible to considerable variation in Hiberno-English varieties (...) in ways which would have differed from those supplied by Welsh, Scottish and most English dialects during koineisation”, which is why Irish influence does seem plausible ([Honeybone 2007: 128](#)). [Honeybone \(2007\)](#) still stresses the fact that the most important donor variety with regard to the NURSE-SQUARE merger must have been Lancashire English – “where there was a complete lack of contrast” – and that Irish varieties only provided a further push towards adapting this feature which was already in the pool ([Honeybone 2007: 129](#)). Just as with the Liverpool lenition pattern it has to be noted that the NURSE-SQUARE merger was not borrowed wholesale from Lancashire English or any other variety and simply carried on. Rather, it was actively selected from “the mix of dialect contact”, adapted, changed, and made a part of Liverpool English (cf. [Honeybone 2007: 129](#)). As has been observed in the case of /k/ lenition, merged NURSE-SQUARE realisations were not commonly found on the other side of the Mersey in 1980. [Newbrook \(1999: 95\)](#) reports that 2 out of 3 speakers in his sample maintain a difference between these two vowels. At the same time both vowels seem to exhibit “surprisingly

low salience” and definitely less “than elsewhere in Merseyside” (where salience must thus be higher) (Newbrook 1999: 95).

Honeybone (cf. 2007: 128) asserts that the NURSE-SQUARE merger as it is found in Liverpool is not known to exist in any other variety in England, Scotland, or Wales. This is not quite correct, though, as in Teesside “the same merger between the vowels of *hair* and *her* which is found in Liverpool (...)” is attested (Trudgill 1999: 70). While not unique to Liverpool, this merger is in any case rare enough to be generally perceived as one of the most characteristic (or even defining) and most salient features of Scouse, to the point where it is commonly picked up by comedians and the like – an early example is Ken Dodd’s catchphrase ‘Whaire’s me shairt?’ (cf. Trudgill 1999: 73). The NURSE-SQUARE merger also figures prominently in the Scouse phrase books pioneered by Frank Shaw and Fritz Spiegl. In fact, these two vowels are the ones that most often occur with a non-standard spelling in the *Lern Yerself Scouse* series (cf. Honeybone & Watson 2013: 322). The particular re-spellings that are chosen for words which are minimal pairs in RP hint at “an awareness of the fact that these words in these lexical sets can be pronounced in the same way” (Honeybone & Watson 2013: 324), while the high frequency with which this is done indicates that NURSE and SQUARE “are imbued with local meaning” and constitute the “most salient” of the vocalic features the authors analysed.

Additionally, this feature is the second for which perceptual data are already available (cf. §3.3.2). Watson & Clark (2013) played recordings to subjects and asked them to rate the audio clips (again in real-time) with respect to how ‘posh’ the speaker sounded. He naturally produced merged NURSE and SQUARE vowels with central realisations. In addition, fronted (Liverpool-like) variants were re-synthesised and participants were randomly assigned to one of two guises, which corresponded to 100% central and 100% fronted realisations, respectively (cf. Watson & Clark 2013: 305–306). Listeners from St. Helens and Liverpool reacted to non-standard realisations of both vowels (front NURSE and central SQUARE) by assigning lower status values to the speaker – at least when non-standard variants preceded standard ones in the audio clip. This corroborates that the NURSE-SQUARE merger is “a salient feature of English in north-west England” (cf. Watson & Clark 2013: 317–320).

3.5 Summary

I have tried to give a (very) short overview of the features that constitute the Liverpool accent in this chapter. Special mention has been made of the four variables

3 Variables

whose production and perception will be the focus of the rest of this book. They are: velar nasal plus and lenition of /k/ for the consonants, and happy-tensing and the NURSE-SQUARE merger for the vowels. In the literature, velar nasal plus and happy-tensing are (implicitly) counted among the less salient features, whereas lenition and the NURSE-SQUARE merger are said to form part of the stereotype of Scouse. This received, and comparatively broad, distinction into salient and non-salient variables constitutes the starting point and the basis of the present study, and will be updated and refined in the following chapters.

Sound change, priming, salience

This volume investigates the realisation and perception of four phonological variables in Liverpool English (Scouse), with a special focus on their sociolinguistic salience. Younger speakers' speech is found to be more local, but only for the two salient variables in the sample (NURSE-SQUARE and /k/ lenition), which appear to carry considerable amounts of covert prestige. Local variants of non-salient happy-tensing and velar nasal plus, on the other hand, are actually found to be receding, so at least to a certain extent Scouse also seems to be participating in regional dialect levelling.

The importance of salience is also obvious in the perception data, with only the two highly salient stereotypes generating robust effects in a social priming experiment (albeit in the unexpected direction). These results indicate that the investigated variables differ measurably not only in their use in production, but also in terms of how central they are to mental sociolinguistic representations of Scouse. They also tell us more about the way we process, store, and (re-)use sociolinguistic variation in perception. By defining likely contexts for significant priming effects they might finally even help in coming up with a more elaborate 'theory of priming' in the realm of sociophonetics.

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