Ethnicity as a source of changes in the London vowel system

Previous acoustic analyses of the short monophthongs of younger and older speakers in two towns in south-east England demonstrate a convergence in their vowel systems (Torgersen and Kerswill 2004). Following Wells’s (1982) claim that London is the centre of accent innovation in the south-east, we suggested that the change was driven by diffusion from London.

Analyses of vowels of young and elderly informants in London provide more evidence for this process. Newly available datasets show how speakers born around 1900 have a system with front TRAP and STRUT vowels, while teenagers recorded in the 1990s have a system which resembles the speech of the young speakers outside London, characterised by an open TRAP and a back STRUT. However, there is variation between ethnic groups: speakers of Afro-Caribbean origin have a more conservative system than white teenagers, especially for FOOT, which is not fronted. The STRUT vowel, however, is a back half-close vowel for some of this group. This can be seen as conserving the Creole quality of this vowel, and as a model for the backing of the vowel in young white speakers.

The relationships between the black and white vowel systems is complex, and they point to inter-ethnic relations as a source of innovation in London English.

References