

//-darkening in varieties of English: A dialectological approach to articulatory variation

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The phenomenon of // -darkening, whereby // is produced with a delayed tongue-tip gesture, exhibits a remarkable amount of variation depending on the variety or its position in the word or phrase.

Some dialects have been reported to show no allophonic distinction between light and dark //, the claim being that Northern Englishes lack the distinction found in standard English (Wells, 1982). The varieties spoken in parts of the North-West (such as Manchester, Lancashire) are said to exhibit dark [ɫ] in all contexts (Cruttenden, 2008; Kelly & Local, 1986), whilst Newcastle //s are reported as being clear in all positions (Cruttenden, 2008; Watt & Milroy, 1999; Wells, 1982). Although such reports are widespread in the existing literature, they are yet to be vindicated by instrumental articulatory evidence, or even acoustic data in some cases.

Moreover, there is thus far no description of the pattern found in Liverpool, which varies from the rest of Lancashire in many features of its accent. As Liverpool English is argued to show a significant influence from Irish varieties (Honeybone, 2007), which are reported as having clear //s in all contexts (Hickey, 1999) it poses the question as to whether this accent will pattern with other Lancashire dialects with respect to // realisation.

This paper presents ultrasound data collected to test whether certain dialects of English indeed lack the clear/dark dichotomy in // variation as found in RP (Figure 1) or southern varieties. Speakers were recorded producing // in ten phonological contexts. The data suggest that, although the distinction between light and dark // in northern varieties is not as phonetically stark as in RP or London, there is still a significant difference in articulatory realisation. The data from the present study provide hitherto absent instrumental evidence for distributions of // -darkening across dialects of English.

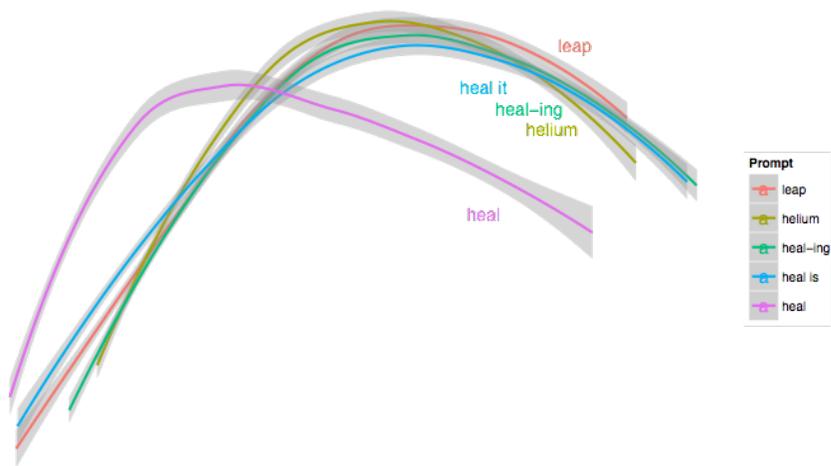


Figure 1: The RP pattern: clear distinction between initial and final position

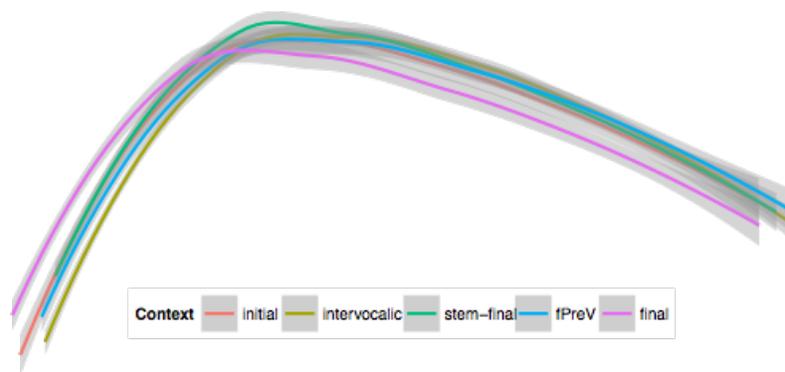


Figure 2: The Mancunian pattern: small distinction between initial and final position