

Global demise of a venerable change in progress

JACK CHAMBERS
University of Toronto

The merger of the phoneme /hw/ (IPA /ʍ/) with /w/ has been progressing in English accents since the beginning of the historical record. The global distribution of the NON-merged regions shows the classic pattern of relic features (Map 1 [not included]), with areas with the distinction non-continuous and more or less peripheral. In these regions the distinction is 'historically persistent'. The distribution is compromised, however, by regions where the distinction continues to be heard in certain social strata; in these regions the distinction might be called 'sociolinguistic persistent' (Map 2 [not included]). The notion of sociolinguistic persistence can be illustrated, for instance, in static atlas displays, for instance, in maps from the Survey of English Dialects (Orton, Sanderson and Widdowson 1978) and the Phonological Atlas of North America (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006).

These distributional facts about the merger take on dynamic dimensions by considering them in the methodological frameworks of (1) sociolinguistic dialectology, and (2) historical sociolinguistics.

- (1) Sociolinguistic surveys show that both the 'historically persistent' areas (e.g., Woods 2000) and the 'sociolinguistically persistent' areas (e.g., Chambers 2002) are undergoing change. Correlations with age and social class show that the merger is accelerating in the former regions and nearing completion in the latter. Projecting these findings, the merger will apparently be completed globally in the foreseeable future.
- (2) Historically, the demise is especially remarkable because the distinction between /hw/ and /w/ has been a feature of English from the beginning. Its origins can be traced back to Proto-Germanic (Lehmann 1962: 88) and among the Germanic 'dialects' it stands as a kind of English shibboleth. The historical record provides evidence of systematic phonetic variation for many centuries. When we seek motives for the 21st century demise of this venerable phonological feature, one plausible answer arises from (what Mair 2013 calls) "the transnational importance of mobile and mediated vernaculars."