On context-related variation of hyper-local variants: /h/ insertion in earlier Tristan da Cunha English

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The retention of hypercorrect /h/ in #V- words (*island, apple, oilskin*) with initial stress is one of the most salient characteristics of Tristan da Cunha English (TdCE), which is arguably the dialect of English around the world that has best preserved this archaic feature (Schreier 2003, Schreier & Trudgill 2006, Schreier 2013). In this paper, I will provide some first evidence of the frequency of hypercorrect /h/ in TdCE and also investigate conditioning factors such as preceding environment and word type. The main focus of the paper will be on context-related usage shifts, or better: the varying usage of /h/ in different interview contexts. Tristan da Cunha, a South Atlantic island, is characterised by extreme geographic isolation. In the late 1930s, a visiting cartographer reported that only six out of 170 islanders had ever left the island. This state of isolation began to change in WWII and abruptly ended in the early 1960s, when the entire population was evacuated to England following volcanic eruptions on the island. During the two years in English exile, the UCL and the BBC carried out recordings with the Tristanians, mostly under highly formal conditions (interviewers and interviewees were not familiar, for instance, and recordings tended to be short). Journeying back to Tristan da Cunha in 1963, a Norwegian sociologist and a Swedish painter, both of whom had visited the island before and knew the islanders well, travelled along and also tape-recorded conversations with the islanders. The results on hypercorrect /h/ variation presented here come from a selected sample of four speakers who were interviewed both by the BCC/UCL in Southampton (1961-2) and then on board ship travelling back (1963). The paper provides quantitative evidence that even highly isolated elderly members of the community show context-sensitivity and vary in /h/ usage under different recording conditions.