

The STRUT vowel in urban and rural accents of the West Midlands

This pilot study investigates the speech of three West Midlands communities: a city (Birmingham), a town (Stratford-upon-Avon) and two villages (Alderminster and Wimpstone). We focus on the STRUT vowel, an important criterion for separating the linguistic South from the linguistic North (Wells 1982: 349). We provide more evidence for the phonemic distinction between /ʊ/ and /ʌ/ in the West Midlands, and show that phonetically the STRUT vowel is neither typically northern nor southern. Through vowel instrumental analysis, we establish to what extent the southern innovation of the STRUT vowel has been developed in each community.

Although it has been generalised that there is no contrast between FOOT and STRUT in the West Midlands (Clark 2008: 156), some studies pointed to a degree of variation in the production of the latter vowel (see also Clark 2008: 149). For Birmingham, variants ranging from [ʊ] through [ʏ], [ɒ], [ə] to [ʌ] have been reported (Wells 1982: 362-363, Lass 1987: 246, Clark 2008: 157). There is a shortage of data on Stratford-upon-Avon and the neighbouring villages. While some placed the /ʊ/–/ʌ/ isogloss just below the area (Wakelin 1977: 87; Upton and Widdowson 2006: 26), others point that we could expect [ʌ] (Trudgill 2004: 38).

For Birmingham, the northernmost community in the study, we expect a fudged lect, with STRUT realised as [ʏ] (Wells 1982: 353). Regarding Stratford-upon-Avon, as it is located south of Birmingham, we expect a lower realisation along the lines of [ə~ʌ] in Wells' intermediate system (1982: 353). Even though the two villages in the Stratford-upon-Avon area are located even further to the south, the speech of a rural area is likely to display more northern features.

In our study, each region is represented by a convenience sample of two young (mean age 26.6) middle-class males. Recorded in February 2012, the interviews elicited 120 tokens of reading speech style. Instrumental analysis involved measuring formant frequencies of the STRUT, FOOT and TRAP vowels at midpoint in Akustyk for Praat.

The results show that the communities under study display considerably different realisations of the STRUT vowel. In all speakers, the quality of the vowel differs from both the northern [ʊ] and the southeastern [ɐ] (Cruttenden 2008: 115-116). The Birmingham informants realised the vowel as [ʏ~ə], while the Stratford-upon-Avon and rural respondents produced a strongly centralised [ʌ]. In all cases STRUT was clearly distinguishable from FOOT, but it did not yet have the typically southern characteristics. Our data shows that this region should be marked separately on the accentual map of England – similarly to the East Midlands – as “being at neither pole on the continuum or conversely (...) being at both poles at once” (Chambers and Trudgill 2004: 110).

References

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