

# Phonological variation and geographical orientation among students in a West Swedish small town school

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## Abstract

*This paper presents main results from a Ph.D. thesis on sociolinguistic variation among students in an upper secondary school in Alingsås, a town of 25,000, northeast of Göteborg. Phonological variants are found to be associated with traditional local dialect, regional and supraregional standard, Göteborg vernacular, general and Göteborg youth language.*

*Correlations with demogeographical areas generally show a pattern going from southwest to northeast (along the E20 highway and the railway from Göteborg). One area does not fit into the continuum, Sollebrunn (NW of Alingsås), where particularly female informants tend to use standard and innovations to a surprisingly high extent. Gender is the second most important social factor, but in different ways. There are major differences from one social group to another when it comes to expressing gendered identity through linguistic means.*

## Introduction

This article presents some of the core results from my Ph.D. thesis (Grönberg 2004), a study of sociolinguistic variation among students from five municipalities, all attending an upper secondary school in Alingsås, a town of 25,000, northeast of Göteborg, Sweden.<sup>1</sup>

The main aim of the thesis was to study co-variation between linguistic variation and social identity, and to relate it to language and dialect change. A number of questions were raised, of which the following will be discussed here:

- To what extent does linguistic variation depend on the informant's orientation towards the place where (s)he lives or other places?
- How do the findings from the upper secondary school in Alingsås differ from results from comparable informants in Göteborg?
- Which social factors are most important for linguistic choices?

## Material

The material studied consists of tape-recorded interviews with 97 students at the Alströmergymnasium, which at the time of recording in

1998 had a total of 1400 students in 14 different national study programmes. These students come from quite a large area surrounding Alingsås. The informants in the study represent five municipalities, ten different study programmes, and there is an even gender distribution.

A sample of the results was also compared with the GSM corpus<sup>2</sup>, consisting of recordings of group conversations with 105 upper secondary school students in Göteborg 1997–1998. Even in this corpus, the informants are distributed evenly with respect to gender, study programmes and geographical areas in Göteborg and surroundings.

## Method

The informants were categorized according to social variables representing different aspects of background and identity: Gender, type of study programmes (vocational, intermediate, preparatory for university), demogeographical areas (based on the extent of urbanization in the five municipalities), Alingsås neighbourhoods (divided on the basis of socio-economic factors), and lifestyle based on two-dimensional mapping (concerning taste, leisure, mobility, plans for the future, etc.). The lifestyle analysis both complements and includes traditional sociolinguistic variables.<sup>3</sup>

Eight linguistic variables were analyzed extensively, four phonological, two lexical and two morpho-phonological. Instances of variants in the recorded interviews were counted manually, and frequencies of variants were correlated statistically to social variables on a group level. Examples from analyzes of three phonological variables will be used in the following discussions.

## Geographical orientation and linguistic variation

One of the main issues was to find out to what extent linguistic variation depends on the informant's orientation towards the place where (s)he lives, towards Göteborg, Stockholm, or other places. Does the influence stem from the

Göteborg dialect, ideas about standard Swedish, or from an ideal national youth language?

The variants studied can be related to several layers of spoken Swedish: traditional local dialect (västgötska), regional and supraregional standard, traditional Göteborg dialect, Göteborg youth language, and general youth language. The question concerning the origin of a variant in a certain level or variety is not always easy to answer, as there are several cases of identical forms in different layers. One such example is the variable Ö (long /ö/, except when preceding /r/), where the variant ‘closed Ö’ [ø:] (*grön* [grø:n] ‘green’) can be found in both local dialect and standard language, while at the same time contrasting with the innovation ‘open Ö’ [œ:] (*grön* [grœ:n]), which can be found in both traditional Göteborg dialect and in general youth language.

The variation found can be interpreted as attributable to differences in geographical orientation in the various groups. Some groups seem quite locally rooted, while others are more oriented towards Göteborg, and some have more far-reaching aspirations – not necessarily towards Stockholm, but towards major urban areas in general. There is hardly any orientation towards other areas than these, except in the case of a few informants who are drawn towards other places in West Sweden.

The linguistic influence as seen in the use of standard forms and innovations is associated with an orientation towards both youth and standard language, on both a regional and supraregional level. When correlated with geographical areas, the linguistic variables generally show a pattern going from southwest to northeast. The frequency of both standard forms and innovations grows higher the closer the informants live to Göteborg, and the two peripheral areas Lerum (SW) and Herrljunga (NE) are, in almost every case, the extremes with the highest frequencies of non-local and local forms. Even in central Alingsås, a similar tendency can be found with informants, in the NE parts of town showing a high frequency of local forms, while those living in Centre and SW are more prone to using standard forms and innovations.

One area does not, however, fit into the dialect continuum discernible along the E20 highway and the railway from Göteborg through Lerum, Alingsås and Herrljunga: in Sollebrunn (NW of Alingsås), some distance away from both the highway and the railway, the nine female informants particularly tend to use stan-

dard forms and innovations to a much higher extent than the informants in Herrljunga, situated at the same distance from Göteborg. (Results are statistically significant at a five percent level.)

One example is the variable U, that represents three variants of the pronunciation of long /u/. The variants are the local ‘lowered U’ [ɥ:] (*hur* [hɥ:r] ‘how’), the ‘standard U’ [u:] (*hur* [hu:r]), and the ‘diphthongized U’ [ɥʌ] (*hur* [hɥʌr]) that is considered an innovation from Göteborg in this study. As can be seen in figure 1, informants in Sollebrunn and Lerum have a similar frequency of the Göteborg innovation ‘diphthongized U’.

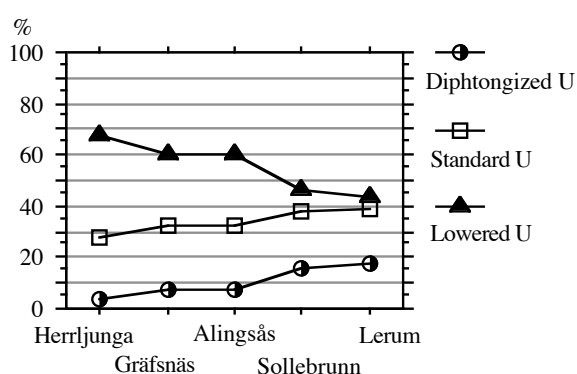


Figure 1. Frequency of U variants in geographical areas

Elements in the Sollebrunn-informants’ adherence to groups point towards a stronger need for identification with other geographical areas than their own. I hope to be able in future research to go into greater detail with regard to the attitudes and values of these informants, to find out why they differ from the overall pattern.

### Comparing results from Alingsås and Göteborg

How do the findings from the upper secondary school in Alingsås differ from findings from comparable students in Göteborg?

The answer to this question is in some ways already given above. The distribution pattern going from SW to NE, as seen between Lerum and Herrljunga, is supplemented and strengthened through a comparison with the GSM corpus. In relation to three of the phonological variables, the results are unambiguous, with the frequency of innovations being substantially higher in the Göteborg informants than in the Alingsås informants.

The curves, which show a strong slant between NE and SE, show an even steeper slant between the areas of Lerum and Göteborg. One example is the variable I/Y, as illustrated in figure 2.

The variable I/Y represents three variants of pronunciation of the long /i/ and /y/. The local variant is the 'lowered I/Y' [ɪ:]/[y:] (*fin* [fi:n] 'nice', *typ* [ty:p] 'like, sort of'), the standard variant is the 'standard I/Y' [i:]/[y:] (*fin* [fi:n], *typ* [ty:p]), and the Göteborg innovation is 'fricativized I/Y' [i:<sup>z</sup>]/[y:<sup>z</sup>] (*fin* [fi:<sup>z</sup>n], *typ* [ty:<sup>z</sup>p]). The results of correlation with geographical areas forms a step, increasing curve for the Göteborg 'fricativized I/Y' from Sollebrunn via Lerum to Göteborg, and a steeply decreasing curve for the local 'lowered I/Y' between the same areas.

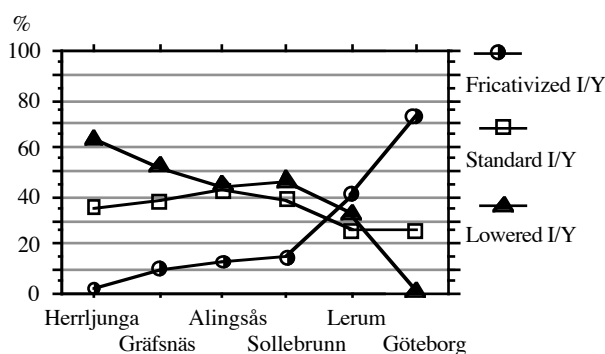


Figure 2. Frequency of I/Y variants in geographical areas including Göteborg

One of the lexical variables displays a somewhat different distribution, but when a study of adolescents from Stockholm is added to the comparison, the results point to a spreading of the innovation 'typ' ('like') from Stockholm to Göteborg in the first place, and then to Alingsås, and that the use has stagnated in favour of other discourse markers in the two major cities, while upper secondary school students in Alingsås and the catchment area still use 'typ' to quite a large extent.

Differing patterns of distribution for innovations (three phonological and one lexical) can be interpreted as two types of regionalization taking place at the same time. The first type consists of a gradual spread from the regional centre of Göteborg towards Alingsås and then further north, and the other type consists of a form of urban jumping, where forms spread from the capital to Göteborg, and then on to the town of Alingsås, and from there to surrounding areas (cf Sandøy 1993:119).

### Further spreading of Göteborg features?

One interesting question is whether innovations that are spreading in Göteborg will spread even more in the region. This would change the spoken language of the Alingsås area even more towards that of Göteborg, as has already happened in, for instance, Kungälv and Kungsbacka, some 30 km to the north and south of Göteborg (Grönvall 2005), or whether the variants close to standard will take over.

Thelander (1979) and Westerberg (2004) describe the rise of a West Bothnia regional standard, where forms which are common to dialects in a larger area survive, while more local forms disappear. The question is whether a similar development might take place in relation to certain West Swedish forms. The variable ÖR, for instance, might suggest such a thing. ÖR represents the pronunciation of the long /ö/ before /r/, with two possible variants: the traditional, local 'closed ÖR' [ø:r] (*göra* [jø:ra] 'do'), and the standard 'open ÖR' [œ:r] (*göra* [jœ:ra]). The 'closed ÖR' is present in a large area including the region of Västergötland (but not in Göteborg or the coastal regions), and this feature shows a high frequency in central Alingsås and all three of the areas to the north (Herrljunga, Gräfsnäs and Sollebrunn), as shown in figure 3. This points to the possibility of the 'closed ÖR' surviving as a part of a Västgöta regional standard, distinguishable from the Göteborg regional standard, in which the 'open ÖR' is standard.

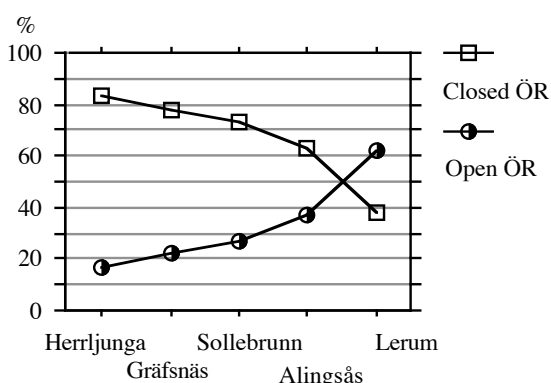


Figure 3. Frequency of ÖR variants in geographical areas

### Discussion

Which social factors are most important for linguistic choices? Is it possible to identify groups

groups with common social identities in order to explain differences in linguistic behaviour?

The social variables used in the study – gender, study programme, demogeography, and lifestyle – all show co-variation with linguistic variables as well as with each other, to some extent. The hypotheses formulated were not always verified, but this was not attributable to a lack of variation but to the fact that this variation was not the predicted variation. For the eight linguistic variables analyzed, different social factors are important, but the one factor, which is most often salient, is that of *demogeography*. After that, *gender* can be seen as being second most important, but in two different ways. On the one hand there are general differences between girls and boys seen as groups, on the other hand there are differences between different groups when sex is combined with study programme, and also in the lifestyle analysis. This proves that there are major differences from one social group to another when it comes to expressing gendered identity through linguistic means. The most salient geographical variation can be found in the phonological variables, while the lexical variables co-vary to a higher extent with gender, programme type, and lifestyle.

As was discussed above, a distribution pattern going from SW to NE is discernible, and this is not only related to distance in kilometres to Göteborg, but also to the dominant lifestyles and values in the adult population in the different areas. The ones who stand out most clearly are the girls in Sollebrunn, with respect to both the demogeographical and the socio-economic categorization of the informants. The lifestyle analysis is an attempt to supply extra information to combine with the traditional social variables, and there is good potential for developing this method further in studies of linguistic change. It provides a better understanding of the informants' social background and aspiration, both in that it takes into account more aspects, and makes it possible to move away from the hierarchical way of thinking which characterizes e.g. social indexation, and thus to capture more aspects of how social identities are constructed in contemporary society.

## Notes

1. *The Swedish upper secondary school, gymnasium, gives courses of three years' duration for students having completed nine years of*

*school, thus having reached the age of 15-16 years. About 98 percent of Swedish 16-year-olds apply to the gymnasium.*

2. *Gymnasisters språk- och musikvärldar, The Language and Music Worlds of High School Students. See Norrby & Wirdenäs (1998).*

3. *The lifestyle analysis was based on Ungdomsbarometern (1999). Cf Bourdieu (2002) and Dahl (1997).*

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