Vowels in rural southwest Tyrone

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Abstract

This study aims to pin down some of the phonetic variation and oddities associated with Northern Ireland English (NIE) in general and the English of rural southwest Tyrone (ERST) in particular. Vowel quality and vowel quantity relationships are crucial here. ERST may have short or long vowels, depending on factors that are not phonologically interesting in other varieties of English. Vowel shifts from Middle English are only partly carried through, leading to sociophonetic variation.

Northern Ireland English

The Northern Irish English (NIE) accent is quite distinctive in many ways. It is an accent that is noticed outside of Northern Ireland, and one that has often been generally stigmatised in other parts of the UK. However there is a good deal of variation within Northern Ireland. It is well documented that the accents spoken in different parts of the province reflect different combinations of the main accent forces that operate. The peculiarities of the history of Ireland, in particular the Plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth century and the shift from Irish to English from the latter half of the nineteenth century have left their mark in the way English is spoken in different parts of Ulster to the present day.

Southwest Tyrone

In a band stretching across Ulster from Belfast to Donegal the dialects spoken in the Republic of Ireland meet the Ulster Scots of the northernmost counties in what is known as Mid-Ulster English (MUE) which has been found to share features of both dialects (Harris 1985). Tyrone is one of the southernmost counties in Northern Ireland. The varieties of Mid-Ulster English found in Southwest Tyrone are particularly broad, representing a variation between older forms and newer ones. Rural speakers are generally expected to be more conservative than urban ones.

One of the most prominent features of NIE is the unusual timing conditions that hold between long and short vowels. What Harris (1985) refers to as “Aitken’s Law”, formulated to account for vowel length in Scots dialects is said to apply here. This means that in certain phonetic environments vowels that in RP would be half long, such as [e] in bed are pronounced with a long vowel, while vowels that would in RP be pronounced with a long vowel are pronounced with a noticeably short vowel, e.g. [ʃʌd]. The particular conditions of quantity in ERST will be documented here.

The phonological system of ERST, along with other varieties of NIE is not entirely identical to that of RP. As in Scots, the /u:/-/u/ distinction is not upheld. This is not a very linguistically useful distinction, so very little communicative information is lost. Other distinctions are made that are not made in RP, such as between horse and hoarse. In some cases there is variation between two vowel qualities, noticeably in words like pull which are found as [pə] (stigmatized) and [pəl]. The first vowel of words like comfort can be either of these in some speakers.

Material

Unlike many dialectological studies, which focus on elderly rural speakers, this study examines the vowels of young speakers. Two brothers, aged 8 and 14 and their sisters aged 10 and 18 at the time of recording, were asked to read a wordlist. The wordlist includes examples of all the phonemes of RP and has a number of key phonetic environments for the high front vowels /i:/, /u/ in particular. This was part of a larger material, including texts and spontaneous speech. Recordings were made using a Zoom H4 digital recorder.

Vowel quantity

McCafferty (2001) accounts for the quantity conditions upheld in (London)Derry English, another variety of Mid-Ulster English spoken in Derry city, which is about 40 km from Southwest Tyrone. There are almost no phonemic vowel length distinctions, but phonetic lengthening is activated in certain environments (see table one for a description of the situation in Belfast vernacular, another variety of Mid-Ulster English spoken about 80 km from...
Southwest Tyrone. According to Aitken's Law (Aitken 1981), vowel length is conditioned by the phonetic environment after the vowel. This process may happen alongside the more general enhanced fortis clipping that can be found in most or all varieties of English.

Table 1. Aitken's Law as applied to Belfast vernacular, another variety of Mid-Ulster English, after Harris (1985:43)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/i/</th>
<th>/e/</th>
<th>/ɛ/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>see</td>
<td>day</td>
<td>Des</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z</td>
<td>daze</td>
<td>pen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>rain</td>
<td>dead</td>
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<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>fade</td>
<td>mess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>face</td>
<td>pet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>fate</td>
<td>Short</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking then at the results obtained by the informants for the vowel /i:/ in Aitken's “long” (see, leaves, trees, believe) and “short” (green, feel, sheep) contexts, we find the following, shown speaker by speaker, with a female Estuary English (EE) speaker as a control.

Figure 1. Average vowel length for the vowel /i/ in Aitken’s “long” (see, leaves, trees, believe) and “short” (green, feel, sheep) contexts.

So what we see here is that there is a considerable difference between the vowel length in the long condition and the short condition for all four of the siblings in the study. This would seem to support the assumption that Aitken’s law should apply in ERST as a variety of MUE. However, the definition of the long and short contexts overlaps partly with the distinction between fortis and lenis postvocalic consonants. All of the long contexts are those in which the enhanced length difference between vowels preceding fortis and lenis postvocalic consonants. The control speaker, a 50 year-old female Estuary English speaker, also had a considerable difference between vowel length in long and short contexts, but the difference is less. It appears that her long /i:/ is about as long as the ERST /i:/, but that her short vowels are not as short as those of the ERST speakers.

So what happens then for vowels that are short in RP and other accents? Consider the case (using the denotation system widely used in studies of varieties of English developed in Wells 1982) of the DRESS vowel /ɛ/. According to Aitken’s law, this vowel will be long in certain postvocalic contexts, such as bed, and short in others, such as get. Unfortunately the recorded material does not have many word list versions of this vowel. For the FACE vowel (Wells 1982), /e/, which is a monophthong in ERST and other varieties of NIE there is data however. The words day (long) and places and great (short) can serve as examples of the way this length condition works in ERST. Again, by comparison, an EE speaker as control.

Figure 2. Average vowel length for the vowel /e/ in Aitken’s “long” (day) and “short” (places, great) contexts.

Here the difference between the EE speaker and the ERST speakers is less obvious from the figure, but the fact that the ERST long vowel is monophthongal makes it quite prominently long.

Vowel quality

In NIE in general, there are a number of prominent characteristics of the vowel inventory. One is that RP’s /u:/ and /o:/ (Wells 1982’s GOOSE and FOOT) merge to /u/ so that boot and foot rhyme (McCafferty 2001). Another is the variation between [ʌ] and [ʊ] that appears to have sociophonetic significance. Consider the vowel plots in Figure 3 of the $F_1$ vs $F_2$ formant frequencies found in the word list elicitation of the 14 year-old male speaker.
Figure 3. Formant frequency plots for the vowels in the word list elicited from a 14-year-old boy.

Notice the quality merging of vowels in GOOSE words (that would have /u:/ in RP) and FOOT words (that would have /o/ in RP). Notice also the variation between [ʌ]-like pronunciations of FOOT words, shown on the vowel chart as “u” (the well-documented case of the word pull (e.g. McCafferty 2001)), and the [ʊ]-like pronunciation of STRUT words, shown on the vowel chart as “ʌ” such as comfort. So then, as explained by McCafferty (2001:158) words of the FOOT class are variably realized with the GOOSE vowel [u] and the STRUT vowel [ʌ].

McCafferty (2001: 157-166) deals with the variation between [ʌ] and [ʊ] at length. An [ʌ]-like pronunciation of words like pull has been found in both rural and urban speech. This feature is very common in the vernacular, but is also stigmatised by the upwardly aspiring. In fact the 14-year-old informant was mocked by his listening aunt when he read pull as [pʌ]. This may be why he adjusted his pronunciation in the next occurrence of the word to something like [pul].

Conclusion

This study shows that the speech found in rural southwest Tyrone demonstrates many of the features found in previous studies. In particular, Aitken’s law appears to apply (although a follow up study will hopefully fill in gaps in the data set to further test the relationship between Aitken ’s law and fortis clipping in ERST). The GOOSE-FOOT merger and the GOOSE-STRUT variation are features found both in ERST and in accounts of the speech of other communities where Mid-Ulster English is spoken.

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References


