# Dialect Recognition and Speech Community Focusing in New and Old Towns in England: the Effects of Dialect Levelling, Demography and Social Networks[1]

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***Abstract***

In Britain, the past few decades have seen the erosion of regional dialects and the spread of levelled, non-standard varieties centring on larger conurbations. This process of dialect levelling has been attributed to increased social and geographical mobility in post-war Britain and has been shown to occur in areas where there is a high level of dialect contact. The study we report here aimed, first, to investigate whether levelling is more advanced in highly mobile populations such as new towns, where the speech community is new and diffuse, than in stable, focused speech communities; and second, by testing participants' ability to recognise their own varieties, to account for the social psychological mechanisms behind dialect levelling. In this article, we discuss the relationship between the dialect perception data and the linguistic results. Three British towns of similar size, but with different demographic profiles were chosen: Milton Keynes (a new town) and Reading in the south, and Hull in the north. The linguistic analysis shows that the accents of Milton Keynes and Reading are converging by a process of levelling: older regional variants are rejected and either standard or new variants are being adopted – changes which reflect abrupt social discontinuity in Milton Keynes and rapid, but less dramatic social change in Reading. In Hull, where we find the kind of close-knit networks that inhibit linguistic change, the adolescents retained traditional features. The dialect recognition results parallel the linguistic data in that overall recognition rates were low for the two levelled, southern accents, but high for Hull. This leads us to claim that accurate dialect recognition is an integral part of focusing in a stable speech community. Conversely, where there is rap[id linguistic change, giving rise to greater diffuseness, dialect recognition is less predictable. Specifically, in both Reading and Milton Keynes, we find that the young

judges do not recognise elderly local speakers, but identify their age peers more accurately. This suggests a discontinuity in the speech communities across three generations, a find which is expected in the new town of Milton Keynes, but is more surprising in Reading, where there is a higher degree of social continuity. We conclude that dialect recognition might be considered a measure of the rapidity of change within a speech community.

## 1. *Introduction*

### 1.1 *Folk linguistics and language variation and change*

In a recent article, Preston has made a plea for the systematic study of non-linguists' opinions about language varieties to complement professional linguists' insights about 'scientifically discovered aspects of language structure and use' (1996a: 72). His concern in that article is partly with implications for public policy, though, as we shall argue, such folklinguistic opinions also bear strongly on issues of language variation and change. Preston's research on Americans' perceptions of United States English dialect areas has enabled him to present both quantitative and ethnographic evidence of a range of social psychological and linguistic factors which influence folklinguistic awareness. If we assume that people's awareness of a particular linguistic feature is related to its sociolinguistic patterning in a speech community, then Preston's approach is of obvious value to sociolinguists investigating language variation. Indeed, the 'modes of awareness' he hypothesises (Availability, Accuracy, Detail and Control) seem to us to have the potential significantly to extend and deepen Trudgill's notion of 'salience' (Trudgill 1986: 11).

This article centres on just one means of collecting folklinguistic data: non-linguists' identification of regional and/or sociolectal varieties presented on a test tape. Surprisingly, this procedure has been relatively neglected despite Preston's plea for it (1989: 3), even though, as we hope to show, the evidence it provides is directly relevant to the understanding of language variation.

### 1.2. *Dialect recognition and the attribution of speakers to one's own community*

A brief review of three dialect recognition studies will illustrate the range of possible links with language variation.[2] Preston (1996b: 320-29) considered the extent to which non-linguist respondents can differentiate between voices with regional

phonology, but no lexical or grammatical cues as to their origin. Preston asked non-linguist Americans to allocate nine Eastern United States varieties to their correct positions on a north-south scale. The overall result was that, with the judgements pooled, listeners placed virtually all the voices correctly on this scale – even though in many cases the difference in the judges' average ranking of adjacent locations was small. One particular pattern emerged which sheds light on the social psychology of variation. There were clear differences between a Michigan (northern) and an Indiana (central) group of judges: surprisingly, the Michigan judges did not differentiate the northern voices as clearly as did the Indiana judges, a finding which, Preston suggests, reflects the 'unity of that territory' as displayed in the hand-drawn dialect area maps produced by subjects from this region (1996b: 324). However, Preston does not explicitly consider the cause of the Michiganers' apparently inferior discrimination abilities. It seems to us that the result may actually be a consequence of the Michiganers' enthusiastic identification with a broad northern area, differentiated clearly from the South, such that the placement task is somehow downgraded when individual voices are perceived as belonging to in-group members, and thus deemed socially attractive.

That this is a possibility is suggested by findings from the second study we consider: this is Williams, Garrett and Coupland's (1999) exploration of Welsh teenagers' recognition of and attitudes to regional accents of Welsh English as spoken by teenagers of the same age as themselves. Two voices from each of six locations were played to judges from the same six locations. A not unsurprising result was that the teenagers were generally more successful at recognising voices from their own location than from elsewhere, and that overall recognition scores for individual voices were fairly low (ranging from 21% to 42%). However, individual voices varied greatly in terms of whether judges from the same locations as the voices could recognise them: the highest rate was 100%, the lowest 13.8%. Equally surprising was the fact that there were often considerable differences in recognition rates between two voices from the same location. Williams et al. find that, in general, it is the voices whose owners are perceived as 'likeable' and 'a good laugh', possibly due to the content of the narratives, which tend to be 'claimed' as belonging to the judge's own regional group regardless of the actual provenance of the voice. They point to this as indicating the complexity of the dialect identification task; it is an example of a social psychological factor mediating between the ostensibly stimulus-based task (here, based on segmental and suprasegmental accent features) and the response. This type of explanation seems to throw additional light on Preston's American findings, as we saw above – though we suggested that perceived in-group membership *in itself* had the power to make a

voice 'attractive', perhaps as an effect separate from other possible (paralinguistic) features of the voice which, if Williams et al.'s conclusions are correct, might be relevant.

The dialect recognition task we report in this article likewise presents two young voices from each research site, again with adolescent listeners. Additionally, we included older voices from the same locations. As we shall see, we too found differences in the recognition rates for voices from same location. However, we adopt a different, but complementary angle in the interpretation of these differences: we examine the particular accent features of the voices, and those voices' relation to the processes of dialect levelling and speech community focusing.

The outcomes of the American and Welsh studies also indicate that the dialect identification technique can help in the interpretation of variation and change in speech communities. The key notion, already alluded to above, is *focusing* (Le Page 1978): a speech community is said to be focused if there is relatively little variation and if the variation that remains is clearly patterned. Such communities are socially stable, and linguistic change is likely go be slow. 'Diffuse' communities, on the other hand, do not have such clear norms, reasons for this usually lying in a more volatile social structure. (See Kerswill 1993 for an example of a diffuse in-migrant speech community interacting with a focused urban speech community.) The link between focusing and perceptual dialectology is this: in a focused community, one would expect members to be more successful at recognising other members' language varieties than the case would be in diffuse communities.

It was as an attempt to test this hypothesis that the third study was conceived. Kerswill's investigation of dialect perception in the Bergen region of Norway aimed to investigate the focusing of the Bergen speech community by testing native Bergeners' sensitivity both to very small and to somewhat greater deviations from canonical Bergen speech (Kerswill 1985, briefly reported in Kerswill 1993). The study used a test tape containing the voices of rural migrants from the immediate hinterland who had accommodated in varying degrees to the Bergen urban dialect, along with a native Bergen speaker. The results showed that not only could the Bergen judges tell the difference (to a statistically significant degree) between the most 'accommodated' rural speaker and the genuine Bergen voice, but they could also rank the remaining speakers in terms of their degree of 'ruralness', the ranking being identical to that established by applying a dialect index based on a range of morpholexical features. It was suggested that the Bergen speech community is exceptionally focused in that the phonetic criteria for 'membership' are extremely subtle and yet salient, though they could not be picked up by a careful phonetic comparison of the Bergener and the apparently fully

'accommodated' rural speaker on the tape.

The Bergen study did not provide any comparative data to evaluate either the method or the conclusions reached. The study we will be reporting partially provides this comparison, as well as taking account of the findings of the American and Welsh studies.

### 1.3 *Mediating factors affecting dialect recognition*

On the face of it, a dialect recognition task is simply a test of sensitivity to linguistic (usually restricted to phonetic) differences; this is true whether or not the task involves 'own-community' or 'other-community' identification (as with the three studies we have just reported, ours tests both of these). Yet, as we have seen, the recognition process will be mediated by a number of other factors, including:

1. The life experience of the judges (relating especially to whether their social networks are close-knit or open, and to whether they as individuals have been socially and geographically mobile).
2. The absolute linguistic differences between the varieties being offered for recognition, and the differences between these and other varieties known to the judges. This factor will itself be affected by the *salience* of the features differentiating them or, to use Preston's (1996a) terminology, their *availability* for perception and comment, and the *accuracy* and *detail* with which they are perceived.
3. The sociolinguistic maturity of the judges (relating mainly but not exclusively to age – see Kerswill 1996, Williams et al. 1999: 370-71).
4. The subjectively perceived social attractiveness of the speaker due to paralinguistic factors (voice quality, tempo, pitch range, content) which one might presume to be unrelated to the identification of the varieties.

Ideally, a study of dialect recognition should either test or control for these factors. The present study tests the first (the life experience of the judges) by systematically varying judges by social class/social network and town. It also tests the second (the effect of linguistic differences), but in a qualitative way. It explicitly controls for the third (sociolinguistic maturity) by using judges of the same age. The fourth (the perceived social attractiveness of the voices due to paralinguistic features) can be be approached by the use of a questionnaire, as it was in the Welsh study, though this does not answer the question of *which* features actually influence the perception.

Alternatively, the Matched Guise technique (Lambert, Hodgson & Fillenbaum 1960) may be used. In the present study, the latter was rejected because we felt it essential to preserve the naturalness of the material presented. Instead, we focused on the phonetic features contained in the authentic extracts which the subjects heard.

## 2. *Dialect recognition in urban England*

### 2.1 *The context of the dialect recognition task*

#### 2.1.1 The Dialect Levelling project

In Britain, as in other European countries, there has been a steady trend towards the loss of regional dialects, resulting in new, compromise varieties combining some of the original dialect/accent features, some new forms, and some forms adopted from a relevant standard. These varieties have a geographical spread that is greater than the old regional dialects, and in a few cases they function as regional standards rather than completely ousting the old dialects. In all cases, they are the result of *dialect levelling* – the reduction in regionally marked forms and the adoption of regionally more widespread features.[3]

It was in order to explore the linguistic and social mechanisms behind dialect levelling that the project *The role of adolescents in dialect levelling*[4] was set up. An important facet of the project was the exploration of subjective factors affecting people whose dialect is involved in levelling, part of this investigation being the dialect recognition task reported here.

Before discussing the task, we place it in the context of the wider study. The project had the following premises:

1. In areas of high population movement, there may be rapid changes in dialect and accent features, including levelling. The speech community is *diffuse*.
2. Membership of a close-knit, stable social network with strong local ties leads to linguistic conformity (i.e. not 'stepping out of line'). This inhibits change, including that manifesting as levelling. The speech community is *focused*.
3. The distance of a town from a national metropolis (in this case London) is inversely proportional to the degree to which the town adopts linguistic features from that metropolis (the gravity model: see Trudgill 1983).
4. Language change is most visible through the comparison of teenage language with older adults' speech and with the speech of younger children.

Additionally, the project built on Milroy & Milroy's (1992) contention that, in urban societies, there are clear differences in the social networks contracted by people of different social classes. The more privileged middle classes tend to have ties outside their immediate neighbourhoods and families: they are often geographically mobile, and are likely to have been socially mobile, too. Working-class people, especially in times of adverse economic circumstances, tend to have closer ties with family, neighbours and work colleagues. The difference is reflected in speech, in that middle-class people use less localised and more standardised varieties than do working-class people. Conversely, working-class speech is more likely than middle-class speech to symbolise a local identity.

Despite these differences, both middle-class and working-class speech undergoes change, including levelling, and the project aimed to document this. We also tested the hypothesis that geographical mobility and open networks (both held to be middle-class traits: Milroy & Milroy 1992) affect the speed and direction of change (towards forms which are both more standard and less localised) *independently* of social class. We did this by investigating (1) both middle-class and working-class teenagers, and (2) towns which differ greatly in terms of the *overall* degree of mobility of their populations.

Two of the towns chosen, Reading and Milton Keynes, are about the same distance from London (c. 70 kms) and have similar population figures, economies and commuting patterns. (See Figure 1 for a location map.) Both are prosperous, with low unemployment. Crucially, they differ in their recent demographic histories. Parts of Reading have large, stable populations with strong local ties, while the town as a whole has seen considerable in-migration. By contrast, Milton Keynes was designated only in 1967, and since then has seen a massive, and continuing, population increase due to in-migration, mainly from the south-east of England. The third town, Hull (official name: Kingston-upon-Hull), contrasts with Reading and Milton Keynes in its distance from London (340 kms.), in its geographical isolation on the north-east coast in East Yorkshire, and in its declining industries reflected both in high unemployment and falling population figures. Even more than in Reading, a large proportion of its inhabitants have strong local ties. (See Table 1 for a demographic summary of the three towns.) We expect, then, that dialect levelling (based on the rise of London and general south-eastern features) will be further advanced in Milton Keynes than in Reading, that changes in Hull will be less rapid and will follow a relatively independent course, and that the use of levelled and standard features will be greater among the middle-class teenagers in all three towns. Some of the results of the project are reported in Kerswill & Williams (1997, 1999) and Williams & Kerswill (1999).


Figure 1: Map showing location of places mentioned in this article

| | New Town? | Close to London? | Population 1991 | Population change 1981-91 | % skilled manual+un-skilled* | Unemploy-ment* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HULL | no | no (340 kms) | 254,000 | -8.7% | 63.0% | 12.02% |
| READING | no | yes (60 kms) | 129,000 (not counting Wokingham) | -5.1% (increase with Wokingham added) | 42.8% | 4.25% |
| MILTON KEYNES | yes, founded 1967 (pop. 44,000) | yes (70 kms) | 176,000 | +39.2% | 44.9% | 4.75% |

*1991 Census, taken from *BBC Constituency Guide 1997*

Table 1: Summary of demographic characteristics of Reading, Milton Keynes and Hull

2.1.2 Dialect recognition and dialect levelling: hypotheses

As suggested earlier, it is likely that members of focused speech communities will recognise each other on the basis of voice samples more easily than people whose communities are diffuse. This expectation can be extended to dialect levelling: speakers whose communities are undergoing rapid levelling will find this kind of 'own-community recognition' more problematic than speakers from communities not subject to levelling. However, as we have seen, recognition is mediated by several other factors, both social psychological and linguistic (see 2.1). Thus, we arrive at the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Own-community recognition will be better among people with strong local ties (working-class judges in Reading and Hull will be more successful than middle class groups in the same towns, but working-class Milton Keynes judges will not have the same advantage).

*Hypothesis 2:* Own-community recognition will be better in towns with relatively little mobility (Hull > Reading > Milton Keynes).

*Hypothesis 3:* Own-community recognition of an accent with strongly localised phonetic features will be better than that of accents without such distinctive features. In the present study, this potentially confounds, or at least interacts with Hypothesis 2.

*Hypothesis 4:* Recognition of an accent from outside the judge's own community depends on how familiar that accent is to the listener (familiarity being a function of a number of disparate factors, especially personal contacts and the broadcast media). We refer to this as the *familiarity hypothesis.*

*Hypothesis 5:* To judge from the experience of Williams et al. (1999), different voices from the same town (even if there is no age difference between the speakers) will not be recognised at the same rate by members of that speech community. Reasons for this are likely to be complex: in this article, we focus mainly on the linguistic features of voices.

*Hypothesis 6:* We extend Hypothesis 5 by further hypothesising that recognition rates will be influenced by the perceived age of the speakers: own-community speakers close to the teenage judges' age will be more successfully identified than speakers who are significantly older. This arises mainly from the assumption that a judge is more likely to recognise an accent similar to his or her own than an accent that is different. Linguistic differences within a community can be a function of age, resulting from rapid language change, and these can lead to older voices not being recognised by younger judges. However, other things (such as phonetic

features) being equal, an accent is likely to be 'claimed' if it is perceived that the speaker is of a similar age to the listener, and hence potentially socially attractive.

2.1.3 Subjects, materials, methods

The dialect recognition task was conducted as one component of a language-related discussion which formed part of the fieldwork for the project. The subjects attended one of six schools, two in each of Hull, Milton Keynes and Reading. The selection of the schools was made according to the criteria for the main project: since we wanted to investigate dialect levelling among people with either locally-based, close-knit networks or more open, less local networks, we selected schools whose pupils could be expected to conform to one of these two broad categories. In Hull and Reading, this meant targeting schools in mainly low-income districts with high continuity of population and schools in middle-income districts with a high proportion of incomers. In Milton Keynes, there are no districts with high continuity of population: this gave us the opportunity to study levelling among high mobility, low-income groups (see Kerswill & Williams 1997).

An important corollary of this procedure is that the two groups are likely to be either broadly working class, using local accents, or middle class with less localised forms of speech. For ease of reference, we refer to the two groups as 'WC' and 'MC', respectively.

24 group interviews were conducted, 22 by AW and two by PK, following an agreed format. The groups were composed of four (very occasionally five or six) 14-15 year olds, each of whom had previously taken part in an individual sociolinguistic interview with the same fieldworker. A total of 96 adolescents took part in the project, a figure which gives 32 in each town and 16 in each school. The subjects participated in a number of activities designed to tap their language awareness. These began with the dialect recognition task reported here, followed by a questionnaire inviting discussion of regional grammatical features, and a general linguistic discussion covering issues such as 'good' and 'bad' speech and correction by parents or teachers.

For the dialect recognition task, subjects in each town were presented with taped samples of ten speakers, chosen so as to be both locally relevant to the judges while still allowing us to compare identifications of some of the same speakers across the three towns. Thus, three different, but substantially overlapping tapes were prepared (six voices being shared), the extracts being taken from interviews we had conducted previously or which had been conducted for us, or which had been recorded off-air. We ensured the samples contained phonetic features characteristic of their regional origins.

In each case, the sample was an extract from a personal narrative.

| Tape presented to judges in: | Voices —> | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HULL | 1 Hull F83 | 2 Milton Keynes F13 | 3 Durham M55 | 4 Middles-brough F17 | 5 Reading F50 | 6 Hull M9 | 7 Public school M14 | 8 Yorks. East Riding M80 | 9 London M13 | 10 Hull M15 |
| READING | 1 Reading M82 | 2 Hull M15 | 3 London F35 | 4 Reading M15 | 5 Durham M55 | 6 London M13 | 7 Public school **M14** | 8 Reading F50 | 9 Milton Keynes **F13** | 10 Reading F18 |
| MILTON KEYNES | 1 Milton Keynes F82 | 2 Hull M15 | 3 London F35 | 4 Reading M15 | 5 Durham M55 | 6 London M13 | 7 Public school M14 | 8 Reading F50 | 9 Milton Keynes F13 | 10 Milton Keynes M9 |

Table 2: Voices presented to judges in Hull, Reading and Milton Keynes

The tapes were composed of the voices given in Table 2, coded by sex and age as shown. For each town, there are one elderly speaker and two young speakers. The 'public school' voice was that of a pupil at a prestigious fee-paying school in the south of England. The subjects were given a form on which they were asked to fill in answers to three questions while the tape was being played: 'Where do you think this person comes from?', 'About how old do you think this person is?', and 'Do you think this person lives in a town or in the country?'. (The last two questions were mainly included in order to give all the subjects a chance of getting at least some answers right, while making the task more interesting.) Afterwards, the fieldworker led a discussion about any features of the voices that might have influenced the subjects in their judgements. For each voice for each town, there is a maximum of 32 judgements; in practice, some subjects failed to make an entry for every voice: the average number of judgements is therefore closer to 30.

### 2.2 *Recognising voices from one's own speech community: overview of results*

We return to one of the main issues of this article: linguistic focusing. As in the Bergen study mentioned above, we can investigate this indirectly by considering people's recognition of voices from their own town. However, by systematically varying both the judges and the 'native' voices (those from the judges' own town), we

are in a position to answer much more specific questions about the nature of dialect recognition and its relationship to focusing.

Figures 2a–2c (Appendix) show the recognition of the two young voices from the home towns of the judges: scores for the WC and MC groups are given separately. Three results stand out. First, both the Hull groups are much more successful than any of the other groups – in conformity with Hypothesis 2 ('judges from towns with little mobility are well attuned to local speech') – though Hypothesis 3 ('highly distinctive dialects are likely to be more easily recognised than less distinctive dialects') may be a confounding factor. Second, within Hull, the WC group is the more successful – this time in conformity with Hypothesis 1 ('people with local ties are attuned to local speech'). The third is perhaps more surprising: this is the fact that the Reading subjects are even less successful at the task than their Milton Keynes counterparts – contrary to both Hypotheses 1 and 2. We turn first to the Hull data.

## 2.3 *Focusing in Hull*

### 2.3.1 Local networks and localised dialect as factors favouring dialect recognition

Figures 3a–3f (see Appendix) show the Hull results in more detail. In addition to showing the 'Hull' identifications (dark shading), they show the number of times the voices were heard as being from Yorkshire, the county in which Hull is situated (light shading). The recognition rates for an elderly Hull speaker, F83, are also given. Note the overall greater success of the WC judges (their range being 86.7% to 94.1%, as opposed to the MCs' 53.3% to 80.0%), a result which is in line with Hypothesis 1. However, we cannot confirm this interpretation until we have shown that the WC group actually has stronger local networks. We did this by asking the judges where their parents were born, on the assumption that local parents are a reflection of locally-based networks. Table 3 shows that, of the working-class parents, 94% of the mothers and 87% of the fathers were born in Hull – the vast majority of them born on the estate where they currently reside – while the figure for Hull-born middle-class mothers and fathers is much lower at 53%.

On the face of it, we have evidence that the strongly local networks of the working-class judges facilitate their recognition of Hull voices. As we shall see later, this interpretation is confirmed by a comparison with the recognition patterns found in Reading and Milton Keynes: to anticipate, the Reading WC group is more successful at recognising own-community voices than the corresponding MC group, while the equivalent pattern is not present in Milton Keynes, where few of the families have local origins.

| | Working class | | | Middle class | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Born | Mother's birthplace | Father's birthplace | Born | Mother's birthplace | Father's birthplace |
| Girls | | | | | | |
| 1 | **Hull*** | Withernsea | | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** |
| 2 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | | | |
| 3 | **Hull*** | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** | East Riding | Barnsley |
| 4 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** |
| 5 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull** | East Riding | East Riding |
| 6 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull** | **Hull** | Canada |
| 7 | **Hull*** | **Hull** | **Hull** | Nuneaton | **Hull** | Nuneaton |
| 8 | **Hull** | **Hull** | Spain | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** |
| Boys | | | | | | |
| 1 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** |
| 2 | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** | Birmingham | Kurdistan | Wales |
| 3 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull** | Manchester | **Hull** |
| 4 | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** | Manchester | Manchester | Wales |
| 5 | Chester | **Hull*** | Lincs | **Hull** | East Riding | East Riding |
| 6 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** |
| 7 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** | **Hull** |
| 8 | **Hull*** | **Hull*** | **Hull** | **Hull** | Manchester | **Hull** |
| % born in Hull | 93.7 | 93.7 | 86.7 | 80.0 | 53.3 | 53.3 |

* indicates individuals born on the estate where they currently live
Note: for ease of identification, 'Hull' is printed in bold type.

Table 3: Birthplace of Hull subjects and their parents

While we have demonstrated a clear working-class advantage in recognition rates, we have not explained why the overall rate for Hull is so much higher than that for the southern towns. As we have already mentioned, the accent may contain features which distinguish it sharply from neighbouring varieties and which act as positive identification markers (Hypothesis 3). One segmental feature appears to be unique to Hull and its immediate hinterland. This is the vowel in the lexical set of PRICE (Wells 1982), which, in Hull, has two very distinct allophones: a diphthong [aɪ] before voiceless consonants, as in *price* itself as well as in *bright*, *bike* and *knife*, and a monophthong [a:] before voiced consonants, as in *bride*, *five* and *pint*. A typical Hull pronunciation of *night time*, then, is [naɪʔ ta:m]. Table 4 shows the use of the two variants in voiceless and voiced environments among WC and MC adolescents and WC elderly people. The most striking result is the virtual absence of the distinction among MC speakers: an RP-like diphthong [aɪ] is used fairly consistently in both environments. The picture is very different for the WC subjects: even in the reading list from which the adolescent data is taken, the distinction is categorically

maintained by all except two of our speakers (a girl and a boy). Overall, the WC dialect appears to be maintaining this old, complex, localised feature, which was described in detail as early as 1877 (Ross, Stead & Holderness 1877: 9).

(a) with following voiceless consonant, e.g. *bright*

| | % [aɪ ~ aˑɪ] | % [aː] |
|---|---|---|
| WC elderly (N=4) | 100 | 0 |
| WC boys (N=8) | 100 | 0 |
| WC girls (N=8) | 100 | 0 |
| MC boys (N=8) | 100 | 0 |
| MC girls (N=8) | 100 | 0 |

(b) with following voiced consonant, e.g. *bride*

| | % [aɪ ~ aˑɪ] | % [aː] |
|---|---|---|
| WC elderly (N=4) | 0 | 100 |
| WC boys (N=8) | 17.5 | 82.5 |
| WC girls (N=8) | 25.7 | 74.2 |
| MC boys (N=8) | 95.0 | 5.0 |
| MC girls (N=8) | 100 | 0 |

Note: Each adolescent read the following words: *bright, knife, lighter, bike, whiter; bride, five, pint, smile, wider.* Scores for the elderly are derived from the interview data: 20 tokens per speaker were transcribed

Table 4: The PRICE vowel with following voiceless and voiced consonants, Hull speakers (adapted from Williams & Kerswill 1999, Table 7)

We now face the question of whether the Hull listeners consciously or unconsciously attended to this particular feature when carrying out the listening task: the two environments (voiceless and voiced) were indeed present in the recorded extracts for two of the speakers, M9 and M15, with the distinction clearly made. However, because the decision had been taken to use only sections of spontaneous discourse as stimuli, and to use a variety of stimulus voices, we could not easily test for any direct effect, using, say, the technique of Labov's Subjective Reaction test (Labov 1972: 146-9). However, assuming that a dialect is normally perceived as a whole, rather than by listening for individual features, we can conclude that the high recognition scores are the result of a dialect *gestalt* which is linguistically well demarcated from other dialects. If this is so, it implies that investigating responses to the PRICE vowel may not be relevant in this context: the distinctiveness of this vowel may be indicative of the distinctiveness of the accent as a whole.

If we allow the definition of focusing to encompass at least some shared phonetic features, then we can conclude that, like Bergen, Hull appears to be a focused speech community. Yet we have also uncovered differences within the community: it is the WC judges who appear to be more 'focused' than the MC, first, in having a more localised accent and, second, in recognising the voices better. We have already argued that this greater ability is at least *partly* due to these judges' greater familiarity with the local variety owing to their more strongly local networks; this factor should, we argue, be seen as combining with the fact that the WC judges are being asked to recognise accents that are actually similar to theirs (Hypothesis 6).

At this stage of the argument, we cannot of course make any statement about the degree of focusing in relation to other communities: we approach this issue below in our discussion of Milton Keynes and Reading. But first, we address a surprising difference in the identification patterns of the WC and the MC judges.

### 2.3.2 Hull or East Riding? The mediating effect of (socio)linguistic exposure

The discussion of focusing does not, however, explain why the two groups of judges identify the elderly Hull speaker in such different ways, with high identifications as 'Hull' by the WC, and no such identifications by the MC, who instead favour a 'Yorkshire' identification. Figures 4 and 5 show the non-generic 'Northern' identifications (that is, excluding not only identifications as 'southern', 'Midlands', etc., but also generic 'Northern') for the three Hull voices and the two geographically closest voices, East Riding of Yorkshire (corresponding to the rural hinterland of Hull) and Middlesbrough (a large town some 100 kms. to the north).

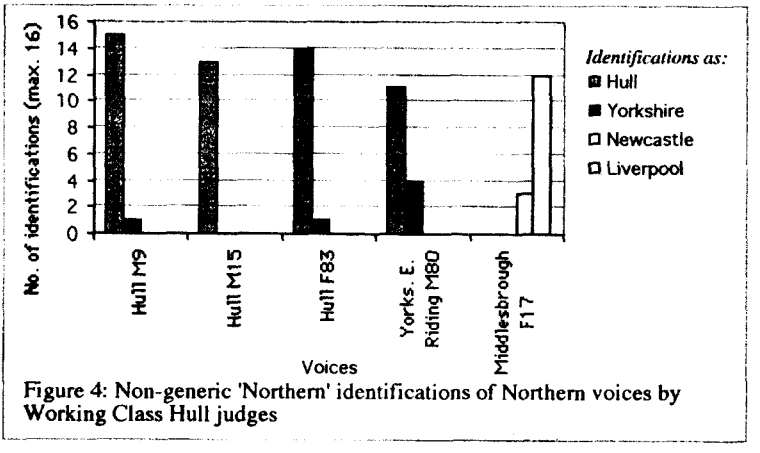



**Figure 4: Non-generic 'Northern' identifications of Northern voices by Working Class Hull judges**

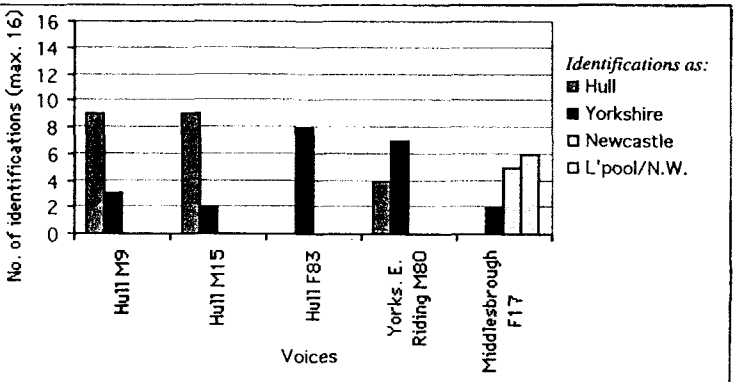



Figure 5: Non-generic 'Northern' identifications of Northern voices by Middle Class Hull judges

Middlesbrough is incorrectly identified by all the judges, something which suggests a lack of familiarity with the accent, due, probably, to a minimal amount of contact between that town and Hull. This would support Hypothesis 4 (the 'familiarity hypothesis'). By far the largest number opted for Liverpool (in the north-west of England), though Newcastle, which lies some 60 kms. to the north of Middlesbrough, was a popular choice – both accents having been made familiar in recent years in popular television soaps and children's programmes. Given the unfamiliarity of the Middlesbrough accent, it is likely that three phonetic factors contribute to these very specific, but erroneous identifications of Middlesbrough: first, intonation is subjectively similar to that of both Liverpool and Newcastle, where a rise-plateau pattern is associated with finality (Cruttenden 1995; Local 1986). Second, the taped extract contains Newcastle-type glottally reinforced pre-vocalic /t/ (Milroy, Milroy & Hartley 1994). The third factor involves the vowel system: while some realisations on the tape, especially those of FACE and GOAT (half-close monophthongs), are similar to those of Newcastle, others are similar to Liverpool, particularly [ɛ:] for NURSE (though it is not merged with SQUARE as it may be in Liverpool); indeed, Llamas, in discussing the NURSE vowel, comments that migration from Ireland and Wales 'may explain the similarity of [Middlesbrough] to Scouse [Liverpool] with regard to this and other variants' (1998: 109).

On the other hand, the scores for the elderly East Riding voice are similar to those for Hull F83, suggesting both the local 'relevance' of the accent and a considerable phonetic similarity to the Hull accent. As with F83, the WC judges place him in Hull, while the MC prefer a 'Yorkshire' identification. A possible explanation for this is that many of the MC judges do not live in the city, but in the dormitory

villages just outside the city boundary. They are therefore more likely to identify elderly speakers as rural because it is in a more rural context that they encounter them. The WC group, all of whom live on the council estate in the north of the city, encounter elderly people mainly in the city.

This argumentation could be extended to explain why the MC judges are nevertheless able to identify the young Hull voices: visits to the city are likely to bring them into contact with young Hull people. However, this possibility is complicated by the presence of a local dialect levelling process, by which features of Hull speech are spreading to the rural hinterland (Middleton 1999). This means that the young voices on the tape to a significant extent resemble younger WC speakers in the villages, where many MC judges live. On the face of it, this ought to lead to an identification of the young voices as 'Yorkshire' rather than 'Hull'. The fact that this is not the case may perhaps be due to a blurring of the city/country distinction for younger people, with dormitory villages increasingly seen as suburbs of the city. This interpretation must, however, remain suggestive.

In this study, the young judges are in general linguistically more similar to the younger voices they are being asked to judge than they are to the older voices. This will in itself lead to higher recognition rates (Hypothesis 6), as will become even clearer when we come to consider Reading and Milton Keynes. As we have already suggested, this has the corollary that voices perceived to belong to people similar to the judges are likely to be socially attractive, and hence 'claimed' by the judges. In conclusion: the relationship between dialect recognition and focusing is not direct, but mediated, affected as it demonstrably is by the judges' own social networks, their exposure to different varieties, and their linguistic similarity to the voices they are judging.

## 2.4 *Dialect levelling in Reading*

### 2.4.1 Familiarity and local networks as factors in the recognition of Reading accents

We hypothesised that dialect recognition in Reading would be a little less consistent than in Hull, but considerably more consistent than in Milton Keynes. This turns out not to be so: recognition rates in Reading are much lower than in Hull, and lower even than in Milton Keynes. We had two grounds for the hypothesis: the greater distinctiveness of the Reading accent as compared to Milton Keynes, and the strongly local working-class networks in the town (see Kerswill & Williams 1999 for a discussion of these points). Figures 6a–6h show the identifications of four Reading voices, including the two young voices already shown in Figure 2b. No-one

recognised the elderly speaker as a Reading voice; instead, approximately half the judges placed him in the Southwest, with responses such as 'Devon', 'Cornwall', 'Somerset' and 'Bristol', as well as 'West Country', which is the widely accepted generic term for this region of England. Most of the remainder favoured 'Northern' identifications, indicating a complete failure to associate the voice with the south of the country at all. We will return to the reason for this lack of recognition after we have considered speaker F50.

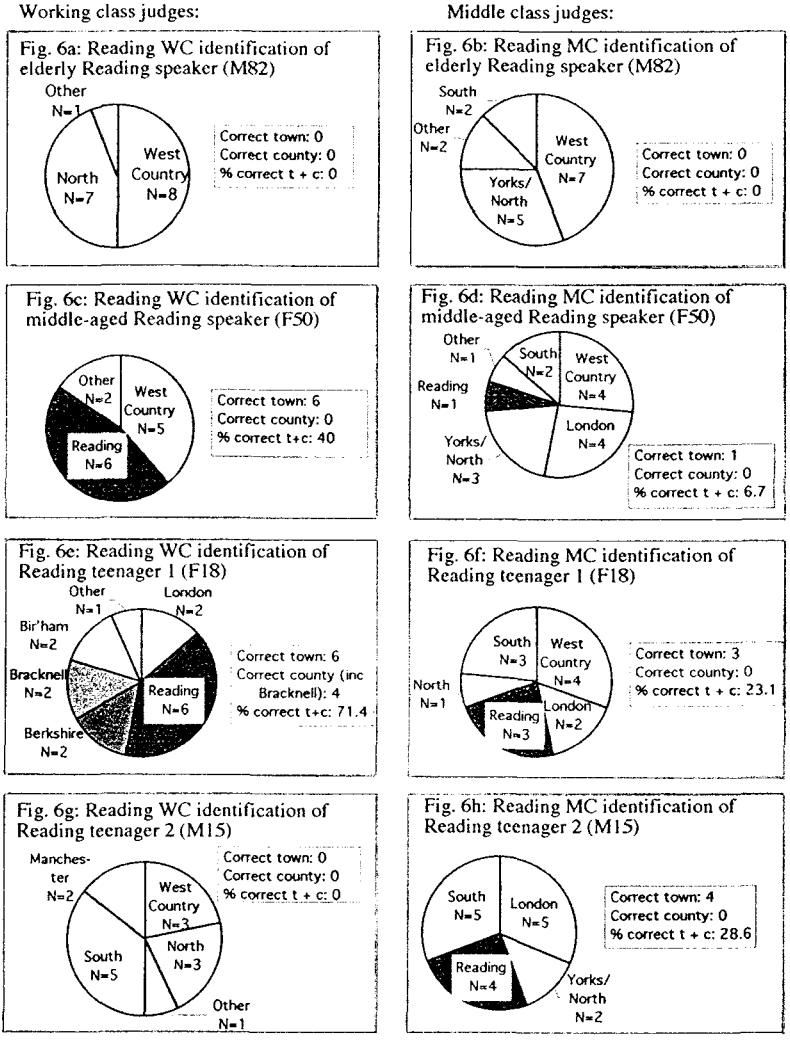



Figure 6: Reading identifications of speakers from Reading

The picture is more optimistic for the second oldest speaker, F50: 40% of the WC and one of the MC judges correctly identified her – though 'West Country' remains, overall, the most popular option. The recognition pattern for F50 is not surprising, since she represents the generation of the WC judges' (older) parents or (younger) grandparents, and so is a familiar 'voice' in the community. This also explains the MC judges' failure to identify her: almost none of the judges' families originate from Reading, with the result that this is a much less familiar voice for them, being encountered only outside the family. Table 5 shows the differences between the birthplaces of the parents clearly: almost all the WC parents are Reading-born, while only a very small proportion of the MC parents are born there. The WC–MC divide in terms of birthplace is even stronger than it is in Hull (Table 3), and this appears to be reflected in the recognition patterns.

| | Working class | | | Middle class | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Born | Mother's birthplace | Father's birthplace | Born | Mother's birthplace | Father's birthplace |
| Girls | | | | | | |
| 1 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Barbados | Barbados |
| 2 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Warrington | Yorkshire | Yorkshire |
| 3 | **Reading** | Guyana | Guyana | **Reading** | Essex | Essex |
| 4 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | | |
| 5 | Germany | India | **Reading** | I. of Wight | **Reading** | I. of Wight |
| 6 | **Reading** | Cambridge | **Reading** | Ascot | London | Portsmouth |
| 7 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Tadley |
| 8 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Watford | Yorkshire |
| Boys | | | | | | |
| 1 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** |
| 2 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Slough | **Reading** | Somerset |
| 3 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Wolverhampton | London |
| 4 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Sussex | Hastings |
| 5 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Hillingdon | Hastings | **Reading** |
| 6 | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | **Reading** | Newcastle | Newcastle |
| 7 | **Reading** | **Reading** | London | London | London | London |
| 8 | **Reading** | **Reading** | Ireland | **Reading** | Germany | Devon |
| % born in Reading | 93.7 | 81.2 | 81.2 | 62.5 | 26.7 | 11.8 |

Note: For ease of identification, 'Reading' is printed in bold type.

Table 5: Birthplace of Reading judges and their parents

We still have to answer the question of why the oldest speaker, M82, is not recognised at all. We suggest that this voice belongs to the generation of the great-

grandparents of the judges, and is thus relatively unfamiliar. Such an explanation would be in line with the 'familiarity hypothesis' we have just discussed. Phonetically the voice is very different from that of the judges: he is fully rhotic (that is, he pronounces non-prevocalic /r/), and uses a strongly retroflex articulation of /r/ – neither of which is true of the judges. He does not use [f] for /θ/ or [v] for intervocalic /ð/, as do most of the WC judges.

The two youngest speakers attract strikingly different recognition patterns. F18 is recognised as 'Reading', or at least 'Berkshire' (the county in which Reading is situated), by 71.4% of the WC speakers. Given that this is a WC voice, this is not surprising, and the lower success rate of the MC speakers (23.1%) is in line with both Hypothesis 1 ('people with local ties are attuned to local speech') and Hypothesis 4 (the 'familiarity hypothesis'). M15, however, is recognised as a Reading speaker only by four MC judges, no WC judges correctly identifying him. Most of the remainder opted for an undifferentiated 'South', suggesting a measure of recognition coupled with uncertainty. Listening to the extract, however, gives a clue to the reason for this, and (as we shall see in the next section) suggests the direction in which the Reading accent is changing: although the voice can be heard to use a range of non-standard phonetic features, such as h-dropping in the items *happening* and stressed *he*, categorical glottal replacement of intervocalic /t/, vocalisation of non-initial /l/, and a broad diphthong [ɛɪ] in FACE, he does not use any marked Reading features. F18, in addition to using all the features mentioned, uses a central vowel [ə] in the items *funny* and *stuff*, (cf. M15: [ɐ]) and a diphthong [ɔɪ] in *inside* (cf. M15: [ɒɪ]) – both of these being features not widely found in London-influenced south-eastern accents, and the latter being specially mentioned as a Reading feature by some judges in the discussion following the identification task. M15 uses a more levelled variety than F18, in the sense discussed in Williams & Kerswill (1999): he does not use strong Reading features, but nor does he use marked London features. Instead, he uses the set of south-eastern features which are spreading throughout the region and further afield, including those which are in evidence in the taped extract. This, in turn, makes his accent more similar to that of the MC judges than is F18's: this is why, we suggest, four of the MC judges accepted him as 'Reading'. Next, we consider whether this boy's speech represents a stage in the change in the Reading accent.

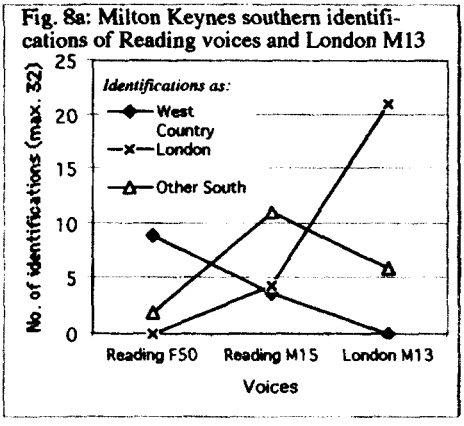
### 2.4.2 The de-focusing of Reading

Our data shows that the identification of the Reading accent as 'West Country' diminishes with the decreasing age of the speaker. This apparently simple fact masks a complex issue: that of the effect of the time dimension. Would this result have been

obtained for an older panel of judges, or if the survey had been done 25 or 50 years previously? Our supposition is that older listeners, or judges in an earlier period, would have been less likely to adjudge M82 a 'West Country' speaker than today's adolescents were. This is because there has demonstrably been change in Reading, most of which can be considered part of regional dialect levelling (Williams & Kerswill 1999). Thus, from a contemporary adolescent's vantage point, the speech of elderly speakers can seem very remote not only in time, but in place. We now explore the apparent 'de-Westcountrification' of the accent, and consider the direction in which it is heading: in particular, is it becoming 'Cockneyfied' (that is, 'Londonised')? Figure 7 (see Appendix) shows the 'West Country', 'Reading' and 'London' identifications for the four Reading voices and those for the two London speakers. Other identifications, including generic 'South', have been omitted. Figure 7a shows the 'Reading' identifications: the impression given by this graph, which ranks the four Reading voices by descending age, is that the accent is becoming less south-western, with only three judges deeming M15 to be 'West Country', which puts him nearly into line with the two Londoners. Figure 7b shows a gradual 'improvement' in 'Reading' identifications, though this stops with F18, with even London M13 being heard as more 'Reading' than M15.

So far, we could be tempted to use the analogy of the accent 'travelling' rapidly in an easterly direction towards the capital. But Figure 7c destroys the analogy. The two Londoners, F35 and M13, are overwhelmingly identified as such (with scores of 78.1% and 69.7%, respectively), while for M15, who is the Reading speaker who receives the highest 'London' identification and whose speech contains the fewest Reading features, the figure is only 16.7%. The picture emerging is that the Reading accent, for all the levelling it has been subject to, remains distinct. Moreover, inner-London speech, even that of the youngest age group, is still easily identifiable by outsiders. Indeed, the extract of London M13's speech contains a number of London features, including [ɛ:] for the vowel of MOUTH, a relatively front vowel, [a̲], for STRUT, and the vowel /eɪ/ (as in FACE) in the auxiliary *ain't*, an item in which Reading speakers tend to use /e/ (as in DRESS).

Interestingly, these judgements are not specific to Reading judges, since the Milton Keynes and, more surprisingly, the Hull judges gave similar identifications. Figure 8 shows the 'West Country', 'London' and other southern identifications of the southern voices which were presented to those judges: clearly, there are stable phonetic features in a London accent and, apparently, in a Reading accent which are nationally salient and available (in Preston's 1996a sense) and which lead to 'London' and 'West Country' identifications, respectively.



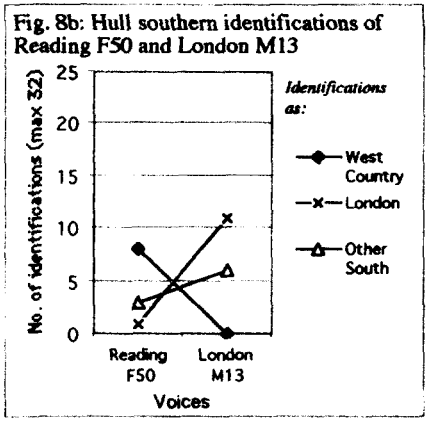




Figure 8: Milton Keynes and Hull southern identifications of Reading and London voices

This is evidence of the continued presence of a degree of focusing in Reading, yet there are also clear signs of the 'de-focusing' of the speech of the town: change has been sufficiently rapid for the oldest generations to be no longer identified as natives of the town. This is clearly not true of Hull for either elderly or young speakers, who are recognised at a very high rate. Our research shows that the continued focusing of Hull is mirrored by a slower rate of change than in Reading.

A particular consequence for Reading of the reduction in focusing (assuming it was greater in earlier decades) is that its residents, particularly the younger ones, seem to associate its accent with the West Country. This 'perceptual dislocation' of the accent reflects, we believe, the rapid social changes in the town over the past 50 years. In 1950, it was a market town dominated by agriculture (its university was founded as an agricultural college) and industries related to horticulture, food manufacture and brewing. Today, it is one of the principal national centres for high-technology computer-based industries, financial services and retailing. In this environment, the link with agriculture has been lost, and it is not surprising that the oldest speakers and their accents have been marginalised.

One particular phonetic feature is a specific cue to the perception of the older accent as south-western: the non-prevocalic /r/, which was mentioned by a number of judges in the discussion sessions as a feature they attended to in arriving at a 'West Country' identification of F50. Anecdotally, we can mention that Reading young people regularly report being accused of talking 'country' when they visit London –

even though they do not use the non-prevocalic /r/; and a middle-aged speaker reported being surprised at how 'country' she sounded the first time she heard her voice on tape. All this is tied in with a strong negative stereotype of south-western speech as being that of unsophisticated farmers, the word 'farmers' itself being the vehicle through which the stereotype is often expressed, with both *r*'s being realised in mocking imitation of West Country speech. Reading's geographical and dialectal position near the boundary between the stereotypically rural South and Southwest and the stereotypically urban Southeast, coupled with the rapid economic changes noted above, makes it particularly vulnerable to the 'farmer' stereotype.

The example of Reading shows that de-focusing goes hand in hand with dialect levelling and a rapid rate of change. Levelling potentially robs people of the possibility of using strongly local speech to mark allegiance to groups based on territory, class or ethnicity (see Kerswill & Williams 1997 and 1999 for discussions of language used as an identity marker). With the perceptual dislocation of traditional Reading speech to another region, and the lack of a distinctive replacement, Reading speakers seem to be losing this possibility. Likewise, the rate of change there is sufficiently fast for there to be a disjunction between the oldest and the youngest speakers, at least in terms of young people's recognition of old people as part of the speech community. It may be realistic to talk of a move away from strong local identifications towards identities based on other groupings, including class, age, gender and ethnicity, with regional identities subsumed into a sense of being 'from the south-east'.

In the next section, we turn to the New Town of Milton Keynes, where there is by definition a sharp break in continuity between the oldest and the youngest speakers (Kerswill & Williams 2000 forthcoming).

## 2.5 *Milton Keynes: an incipient focused, but levelled speech community?*

### 2.5.1 Non-local networks and the recognition of Milton Keynes voices

Figure 9 shows the recognition patterns for Milton Keynes, as before with the two class groups' identifications shown separately. As we noted earlier (Section 2.2), the Milton Keynes judges are more successful at their task than are the Reading judges, a finding which goes against our hypotheses. However, closer examination shows that the results pattern quite differently from those of Reading, in a way consistent with Milton Keynes's status as a new community whose younger families have no time-depth in the town.

The failure of any of the WC judges to recognise the elderly speaker, F82, comes

as no surprise: in addition to the factors we have already adduced for the parallel finding in Reading, a reason must also be the fact that very few of these judges have any family connections with older people in the town. Elsewhere, we have argued that this lack of continuity is reflected in the linguistic production data (Williams & Kerswill 1999; Kerswill & Williams forthcoming); what we are dealing with here is the effect a lack of continuity has on dialect recognition. Table 6 shows the judges' place of birth and that of their parents. There is a striking difference between this table and the equivalent tables for Hull and Reading: in Milton Keynes, there are only slightly more locally-born parents among the WC group than among the MC group (around 13%, as opposed to 3% for the MC), whereas the percentage of locally-born WC parents in the other towns was extremely high (80-90%).

| | Working class | | | Middle class | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Born | Mother's birthplace | Father's birthplace | Born | Mother's birthplace | Father's birthplace |
| Girls | | | | | | |
| 1 | Scotland | Scotland | Scotland | **M. Keynes** | Newbury | St. Helena |
| 2 | **M. Keynes** | Halifax | London | **M. Keynes** | London | Leeds |
| 3 | Luton | Portsmouth | Watford | Oxford | Oxford | Oxford |
| 4 | London | London | London | **M. Keynes** | Lowestoft | **Bletchley** |
| 5 | **M. Keynes** | **Bletchley** | **Bletchley** | Cranfield | Leicester | Bucks. |
| 6 | Lancashire | Lancashire | Liverpool | | | |
| 7 | Blackpool | London | | Glasgow | Inverness | Inverness |
| 8 | **Bletchley** | Stevenage | Ireland | **M. Keynes** | Kenya | Kenya |
| Boys | | | | | | |
| 1 | **M. Keynes** | **Bletchley** | **Bletchley** | Birkenhead | Birkenhead | Birkenhead |
| 2 | London | Essex | London | London | Luton | Luton |
| 3 | **M. Keynes** | London | London | Kent | Manchester | Dorset |
| 4 | **M. Keynes** | Gt. Yarmouth | Ireland | Aylesbury | Poland | Manchester |
| 5 | Newbury | Newbury | Tadley | Northampton | Newport Pagnell | Newport Pagnell |
| 6 | Ireland | Halifax | Ireland | Bristol | Bristol | Manchester |
| 7 | **M. Keynes** | London | London | Northampton | Newcastle | 'North' |
| 8 | **M. Keynes** | London | Jamaica | Brighton | Northants. | Leicester |
| % born in M. Keynes | 50.0 | 12.5 | 13.3 | 26.7 | 0 | 6.7 |

Note: For ease of identification, 'Milton Keynes' and 'Bletchley' are printed in bold type (Bletchley lies within the borough of Milton Keynes).

Table 6: Birthplace of Milton Keynes judges and their parents

This does not explain why the positive identification of F82 as 'Milton Keynes' or 'Buckinghamshire' (the county in which Milton Keynes lies) is relatively high for the MC judges (38.5%). The same argumentation could perhaps be used as for the

Hull MC judges: many of the Milton Keynes MC judges lived in villages near the town. Elderly speakers like F82 would be encountered in the villages, and her 'voice' would be familiar. At present, however, this interpretation is somewhat speculative.

The fact that few of the Milton Keynes judges have locally-born parents means that 'localness of network' ceases to be a possible factor in the explanation of differences in judgements, as it was in both Hull and Reading, where there was a marked tendency for the WC judges to recognise own-community voices better than MC judges. The Milton Keynes results, *when taken together with the results for Hull and Reading*, in fact strongly support the relevance of networks as an independent factor: Figures 9c–9f (see Appendix) show that there is practically no difference in the recognition of the younger voices between the two classes (20% vs. 25% for M9, 67% vs. 64% for F13). This leads us to the conclusion that it is network, and not class that is the decisive factor in own-community dialect recognition. This conclusion constitutes powerful support for Hypothesis 1 – though we argue elsewhere that class has a decisive effect in other areas: those of language and identity (Kerswill & Williams 1997), and the patterning of linguistic variables (Kerswill & Williams 1999).

2.5.2 Milton Keynes and Reading: converging accents following different paths

We have previously noted the Reading judges' lack of success in recognising Reading accents, and we ascribed this to dialect levelling and rapid change. These factors should apply even more in Milton Keynes, though the slightly better own-community identifications seem to refute this. This means that we may be witnessing an incipient 'focused' speech community, which is developing out of the diffuse melting pot of the incomers' generation. Our research shows that both towns are subject to the same dialect levelling, leading to a number of shared features. For dialect perception, the equivalent of linguistic levelling is increasing similarity in patterns of recognition – and here we find that the overall frequencies are indeed similar, though there are detailed differences which we can relate to differences in the localness of the judges' networks.

However, when we consider the phonetic features of the young Milton Keynes and Reading voices, a striking difference emerges between the two towns. We saw above how the more strongly localised Reading voice, F18, was perceived as 'Reading' much more frequently than the more levelled voice, M15, whose provenance listeners were unwilling to commit themselves to. The Milton Keynes voices, on the other hand, show precisely the reverse pattern. F13 does not use any marked regional features; thus, she does not use the older Buckinghamshire [ʌɪ] for PRICE, but instead

uses [ɑɪ], and she uses [aʊ] for MOUTH. This makes her accent subjectively quite similar to Reading M15. On the other hand, Milton Keynes M9, who is identified as a Londoner by 71.8% of the judges, has a rather different accent: in particular, he uses London [ɛ:] for the MOUTH vowel – acquired, no doubt, from his parents, who are from London.

The pattern is that, whereas in Reading it is the *less levelled* accent that is the better identified, in Milton Keynes it is the *more levelled* accent. The difference can be related directly to the history of the two towns and their dialects over the past 30 years. Reading's dialect has long contained localised features, and these survive sufficiently (albeit weakly) for them to be markers of the Reading origin of a young speaker. By contrast, there are few if any young linguistic inheritors of the older North Buckinghamshire dialect of the area now occupied by modern Milton Keynes: younger members of local families are, presumably, now linguistically absorbed into the new, in-migrant mainstream. Of the two young Milton Keynes speakers, the one with the more localised pronunciation traits (M9) in fact derives his accent from elsewhere, in this case London. The fact that 35% of the in-migrants came from the capital means that M9's accent will be widely heard in Milton Keynes – more so, probably, than a young North Buckinghamshire-derived accent. Nevertheless, it is the levelled accent represented by F13 that is probably numerically in the ascendancy, and to which young speakers accommodate as they reach their teens: indeed, our previous research (Kerswill & Williams forthcoming) suggests that speakers like M9 tend to modify their accent towards that represented by F13 as they reach their teens. It is this adolescent age group, we argue, that is establishing the 'new' accent of Milton Keynes. In consequence, F13's accent is the one perceived as characteristic of the younger speakers, and this is reflected in the relatively high recognition scores for her voice.

2.5.3 Does own-community perception co-vary with linguistic features?

As we have shown elsewhere (Williams & Kerswill 1999), the accents of Milton Keynes and Reading are converging by a process of levelling, though they are taking different routes. The dialect perception data adds to the linguistic performance data by giving more detail to those routes. First, it accurately reflects the linguistic discontinuity between older and younger generations in Milton Keynes; however, contrary to expectations, it shows that the same discontinuity applies in Reading, though only in terms of perception, linguistic features showing considerable continuity despite the rapidity of change. Second, it shows that perception patterns correlate with the strength of the listener's local networks, and that these networks are

in turn reflected in the degree to which the listener's own speech is localised, and hence localisable. However, in an exceptionally fluid community, such as that in a new town, it seems that this relationship does not apply: it may be the more levelled speakers, with fewer localised features, who are perceived as local. Clearly, the relationship between dialect perception and dialect production is not straightforward, affected as it is by a number of social factors. Careful examination, however, yields insights into dialect levelling which are not available from the linguistic data alone.

## 3. *Discussion: Dialect perception and focusing*

### 3.1 *Social structures, linguistic distinctiveness and familiarity as factors in focusing*

Before we return to the main theme of this article, we will summarise our findings in relation to the hypotheses.

There was ample support for **Hypothesis 1**: 'Own-community recognition will be better among people with strong local ties': in both Hull and Reading, the WC groups showed better own-community recognition. In Milton Keynes, there was no WC advantage. However, while in Hull the WC showed better recognition rates for all the Hull voices, in Reading it was the MC who recognised the more 'levelled' speaker (M15) the better. This suggests that his greater similarity to the MC judges' own accents might have played a part. It may well be that the hypothesis only holds for the recognition of voices with strongly localised accents.

There turned out to be a close relation between **Hypothesis 2**: 'Judges from towns with little mobility are well attuned to local speech' and **Hypothesis 3**: 'Highly distinctive dialects are likely to be more easily recognised than less distinctive dialects'. In the context of the present study, they must be interpreted together. They form part and parcel of an emerging, multifaceted picture of focusing in which large-scale social patterns, especially mobility and social networks, interact with language use: a focused speech community is one in which highly distinctive dialect features coupled with a slow rate of language change co-occur with strongly local networks and low geographical mobility. A corollary of all four factors in tandem (distinctive dialect, slow rate of change, local networks and low mobility) is the high recognition rates noted for Hull. On an individual level, there will of course be differences, particularly those dealt with by Hypothesis 1 and by Hypothesis 4, to which we turn next.

It is almost a tautology to say that accents which are familiar to the judge will

be better recognised than those which are not (cf. **Hypothesis 4**). However, the range of factors contributing to familiarity is wide. The most important distinction may be between those factors which promote the recognition of an own-community accent and those which facilitate the identification of accents from elsewhere. Local networks and family ties influence own-community recognition, as this research has shown; however, for the recognition of other accents, three factors in particular may be important: (1) the degree of contact between one's own community and the community represented by the voice, (2) whether a voice sounds like someone the judge happens to know, and (3) the influence of the broadcast media. In the contemporary world, the broadcast media are a crucial means by which familiarity with varieties is spread, and this becomes very clear from the discussion sessions following the dialect recognition task. Of the six voices heard by subjects in all three towns, Durham M55 has the most consistent identification: 63.7% identified the voice as 'Newcastle', which we accepted as correct since Durham lies just 25 kms. south of Newcastle and has an accent sharing many features with that of Newcastle. In the discussion sessions, many judges said that they knew the accent from *Byker Grove*, a popular and long-running children's soap set in Newcastle and using local child and teenage actors. Additionally, judges in one school cited the fact that one of their teachers had a Newcastle accent. The second best identified voice was that of London M13, who was recognised by 60.4% of the judges; in this case, the popular soap *EastEnders* would have been a factor making London accents familiar, though London voices are heard over a wide sector of radio and television broadcasting. In contrast, Hull M15 was identified as coming from Hull by no-one outside that city – even though Hull has a population figure that is 65% of that of Newcastle (254,000 vs. Newcastle's 389,000). However, he was correctly located in Yorkshire by 24.6% of Reading and Milton Keynes judges, this being the single most common identification ('North', 'Liverpool' and 'Manchester' being popular, but less common choices). There are no television series set in Hull, nor are there any icons of popular culture from there. A comparison of the results for Hull M15 and Durham M55 strongly supports the hypothesis that familiarity through media exposure is a decisive factor.

We have found ample support for **Hypothesis 5**: 'Different voices from the same town (even if there is no age difference between the speakers) will not be recognised at the same rate by members of that speech community'. However, the reasons we adduced for this finding can be related to factors other than those discussed by Williams et al. (1999): though of course we do not deny that 'social attractiveness' due to paralinguistic and content factors plays a part, we were able to relate the differences to the degree of focusing of the speech community and the amount of

dialect levelling.

In our study, **Hypothesis 6**: 'Own-community voices close to the age of the judges will be relatively easily recognised' forms an extension of Hypothesis 5. We found that a lack of recognition of elderly speakers only occurs in the two towns with rapid language change: Reading and Milton Keynes. This means that we can add 'rapidity of change' to loss of focusing and the presence of dialect levelling as a factor impeding dialect recognition. However, the intervening variable which reflects the factors directly affecting a judge's success, is the combination of a distinctive dialect and the judge's familiarity with that dialect.

### 3.2 *Degrees of focusing*

Finally, we return to the main theme of this article, the relationship between dialect perception and speech community focusing. It is clear that there is no direct correlation between the two: measuring focusing by means of dialect perception leads to a complex picture, and the results must be interpreted against the background of a number of mediating social and social psychological variables. Changes in dialect perception over 'apparent time', that is, comparing the recognition of older and younger voices, shows that both rapid linguistic change and a break in contact across the youngest and oldest speakers lead to an apparent discontinuity in a speech community and, we may assume, a reduction in focusing. This reduction can be reversed, as we can see in Milton Keynes where some degree of dialect recognition is beginning to appear and less diffuse social networks are developing. Overall, we can say that Hull is the most focused of the three towns: recognition is mainly high, and there is little loss of recognition across three or even four generations. Although the Bergen study did not investigate age differences of this sort, it did show that there are unequivocal phonetic cues to speech community membership there, and that they are exploited by native judges. Despite a different methodology, the high success rates suggest that the same is true for Hull.

Reading and Milton Keynes must be regarded as occupying the same, much lower position on a putative subjective focusing scale: both show a loss of recognition across generations and relatively low levels of recognition within the same generation. But this simple picture for Reading and Milton Keynes belies greater complexity: our comparison of the social networks of the judges, and our discussion of the degree of levelling of the voices presented on the tape, suggests differences in the sociolinguistic structure of these towns, due, we argue, to their very different demographic histories. Most striking of all was the very frequent identification of

older Reading speakers as 'West Country' and therefore rural, suggesting what we called a 'perceptual dislocation' of the town's accent. We argued that this was a consequence of rapid social changes in the town. Reading contrasts with Milton Keynes, which was founded on an in-migrant base and consequently started from a state of diffusion, which is gradually being replaced by a degree of focusing.

The relationship between this 'perceptual focusing' (that is, degree of own-community dialect recognition) and linguistic behaviour is one we have touched upon in this article. Perceptual focusing is closely linked to Hypothesis 3 ('highly distinctive dialects are likely to be more easily recognised than less distinctive dialects'), and yet the relationship is not straightforward. As we have seen, there is a clear effect of the judge's familiarity with the accent being presented, including that of his or her own town. This familiarity is in turn linked to the judge's social network characteristics. As we argued in the discussion of Hypotheses 2 and 3, dialect recognition forms part of a broader view of focusing, in which social structures, especially local networks and low mobility, combine with distinctiveness of dialect, clear sociolinguistic patterns and slow linguistic change to form a focused speech community.

All this, of course, confirms dialect recognition as an aspect of human sociolinguistic behaviour that is mediated by, and interacts with, a range of highly disparate factors. As a result, it has a complex, but nonetheless investigable, relationship with other sociolinguistic processes, including dialect levelling and other forms of language change.

## NOTES

[1] A version of this paper also appears in Daniel Long and D. Preston (ed) (forthcoming) *A Handbook of Perceptual Dialectology* Vol. 2. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

[2] There is a problem of terminology here. The reader will note that we will be using the terms *accent* and *dialect* somewhat loosely. In British linguistic tradition, 'accent' refers to pronunciation features (e.g., Hughes & Trudgill 1996: 3). This covers subphonemic variation, but also variations in phonological inventory and the predictable difference in phonemic incidence this leads to (e.g., Southern English and Scots /kʌp/ *cup* corresponds to Northern English /kʊp/, because of the absence of /ʌ/ in Northern English varieties). 'Accent' also covers phonologically predictable differences in incidence, such as the Southern English use of /ɑ:/ as against Northern /æ/ before voiceless fricatives in items such as *bath*. 'Dialect', on the other hand, refers to grammatical and lexical features, as well

as non-predictable differences in phonological incidence, such as Durham English /θaʊt/ in *thought*, for which Received Pronunciation has /θɔːt/. In this article, our use of 'accent' and 'dialect' on the whole reflects this division. However, following usual practice we use 'dialect' as a modifier referring to all aspects of regional and social variation in the terms *dialect recognition* and *dialect levelling* '.

[3] For discussions of levelling in Europe, see Cheshire, Edwards & Whittle 1993; Thelander 1982; Hinskens 1996; Trumper & Maddalon 1988; Sandøy 1998; Kerswill 1996b; and papers in Vol. 10 of *Sociolinguistica*.

[4] Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain, 1995-8, ref. R000236180. Award holders: Ann Williams, Paul Kerswill and Jenny Cheshire. Research Fellows: Ann Williams and Ann Gillett. See Kerswill & Williams (1997), Williams & Kerswill (1999).

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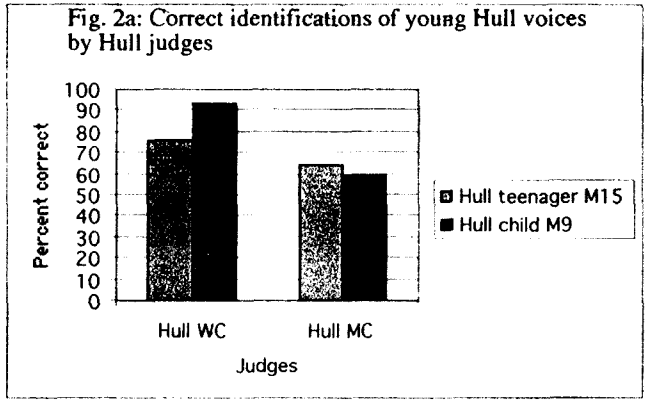
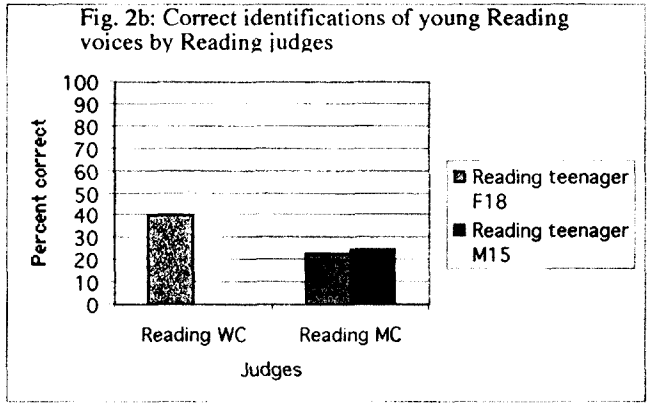
## APPENDIX



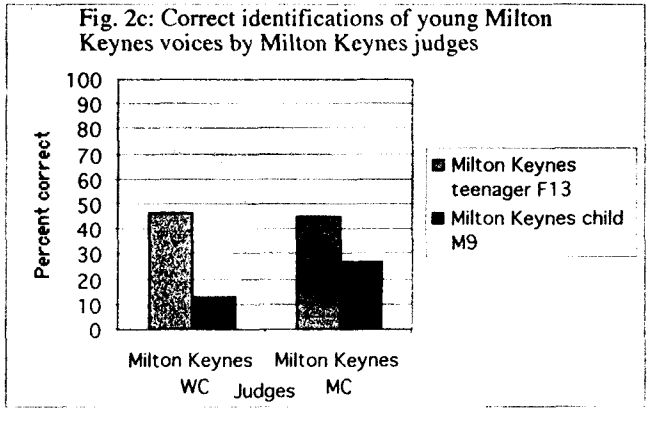
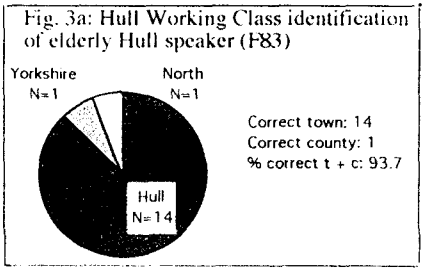
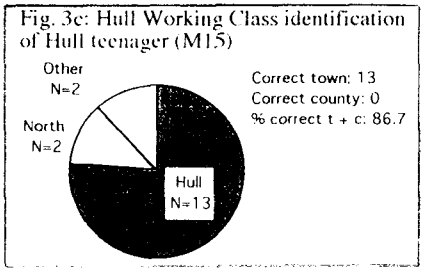
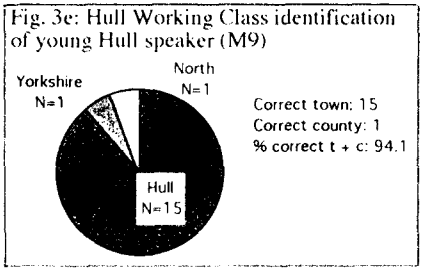




Figure 2: Correct identifications of young voices from judges' home towns

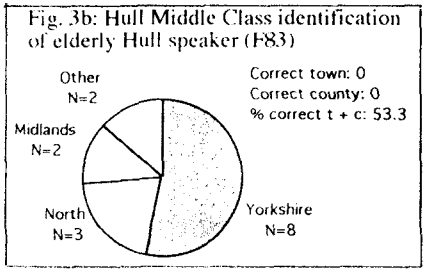
Working class judges:

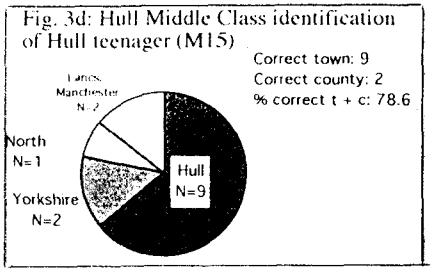



Middle class judges:



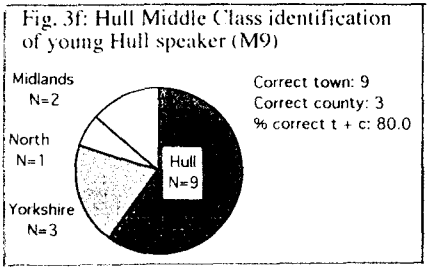




Figure 3: Hull identifications of speakers from Hull