

Lexical set membership in contact varieties of English: the re-organisation of BATH and TRAP in Indian English

In this study we test the BATH –TRAP contrast in a cohort of 50 English-medium educated speakers of Indian English in their early twenties, at the start of their studies at the University of Edinburgh. Until the 1980s, RP pronunciation was influential in India, and descriptions of the elite group of “Educated Indian English” speakers suggest that they had the RP BATH-TRAP contrast, with TRAP as /ae/ and BATH as /a/ (a more centralised version of RP /ɑ:/) (Mesthrie and Bhatt 2008, Nihalani et al 2004).

Since that time the group of English-medium educated, and/or functionally native speakers of English has expanded dramatically. There are studies which show the superstrate derived features spreading among this larger English medium educated group (Sahgal and Agnihotri 1988) and studies which show substrate features spreading among this group (Chand 2010). We hypothesize that the older variants for BATH and TRAP will be closer to /a/ and /ae/ and more contrastive, and the newer variants for both TRAP and BATH will be under pressure from substrates (both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian) to centralise (Wiltshire and Harnsberger 2006). Furthermore, fronted BATH /ae/ vowels may also occur under the influence of American English which has been noted for other Asian Englishes (Hansen Edwards 2015, Tan 2016).

The BATH-TRAP variable offers three kinds of information 1) group and individual variation in the realisation of the contrast; 2) variation within the TRAP and BATH sets, and 3) variable assignment of set membership to particular lexemes. It is assumed that NS of a dialect with the contrast will control the set; less is known about functionally native speakers in a contact setting.

Speakers were recorded producing BATH vowels in a diapix task (Baker and Hazan 2009), a word elicitation task, and two reading tasks. Overall the IndE speakers demonstrate a contrast in F2, but this is much less of a contrast than in the SSBE control group, and there is no distinction in duration. For almost half of the individuals there is substantial overlap. Low frequency BATH words are more likely to occupy an individual’s TRAP space. Most speakers have a small number of BATH tokens that are even more fronted than their TRAP tokens, and some individuals show considerable “extreme fronting”.

Although all speakers were English medium-educated, the use of English in the home had an effect on the contrast between BATH and TRAP in F2 and in duration. We expect that this group of speakers have less exposure to the English accent of English-medium educated parents and in some cases grandparents. Gender also interacted with the F2 contrast, with women displaying more back values for BATH. This could be attributed to women being more attuned to the older prestige norm, but it may also have to do with gender distinctions in course choice. Women in the sample were more typically in the humanities, where they are more likely to have come into contact with exposure to the older prestige norm.

References

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