

Listener sensitivity to localised accent features using the Geographical Association Test (GAT)

Perceptual dialectology (PD) has for several decades been an important element of sociolinguistic inquiry. PD research has, however, tended to focus on participants' abilities to identify and distinguish between accents as though they were monolithic objects, rather than intersecting constellations of phonetic and phonological features. Relatively little PD work has thus far investigated listeners' indexical associations between specific pronunciations and geographical factors.

The present paper presents findings from an experimental perception task designed to test associations of this type. This task was part of a suite of elicitation techniques deployed for the TUULS project ('The Use and Utility of Localised Speech Forms in Determining Identity: Forensic and Sociophonetic Perspectives'; UK ESRC ES/M010783/1).

TUULS focusses on phonological variation and change in the speech of participants (N=120) from three urban centres in the North East of England: Newcastle, Sunderland and Middlesbrough (i.e. 40 per locality). Our analysis considers accent-internal variation as well as variation among the three accents, and specifically examines the effects of informants' mobility (routinised mobility vs. relative immobility) on their usage of highly-localised pronunciations. Perception tests involving key accent features were subsequently run on a 40-strong subset of the participants (10 per locality).

In this paper we present data gathered using a perception task called the Geographical Association Test (GAT). Over 50 stimuli containing target features of interest were presented aurally to listeners in the form of single-word utterances recorded during the production interviews. Using an on-screen drag-and-drop task, participants indicated on a map of northern England the places with which they would most closely associate a pronunciation. We report on the correlations between the perceptual and the production data, and explore differences across the three localities. We also consider disparities between mobile and non-mobile participants as a measure of the granularity of their knowledge of the geographical distributions of localised forms, and how this knowledge may be dependent upon the (lack of) exposure to and interaction with speakers of other, closely related varieties.