

Long-mid vowel mergers in East Anglia: Exploring correlations of GOAT and GOOSE variations

Rapid shrinkage of the East Anglian dialect area in recent years has resulted in a classic “dialect death situation” (Trudgill, 1986:68). Yet, despite this, Norfolk and the northernmost part of Suffolk, both linguistic sub-zones of East Anglia, maintain several distinctive mergers within their vowel systems, namely that of NEAR/SQUARE and PRICE/CHOICE. Most remarkably, however, these areas show a resistance to the long-mid vowel mergers undergone in Early Modern English, whereby contrast between the long monophthongs /ɛ:/, ɔ:/ and the diphthongs /ei, ou/ was lost (Wells, 1982). These mergers were completed in most British dialects over a century ago, excluding the variety of Welsh English spoken in the Rhondda Valleys (Walters, 2001). Trudgill notes the FACE merger reached completion across all of Suffolk in the 70s, while through lexical transfer tied to working class speakers and exposure to London varieties, the same is true for the corresponding GOAT vowel, but only in the south of the county (1978).

With the geographic scope of the GOAT merger uncertain, this paper therefore returns to the earlier assumption that linguistic diffusion between south and north Suffolk would be gradual (Trudgill, 1974). It examines how, why, and to what extent the northern dialect area of Suffolk has resisted the long-mid vowel merger which resulted in the attested GOAT set wherein [ou] and [ʌu] represent the contrast between, for example, ‘road’ and ‘rowed’, or ‘nose’ and ‘knows’. It assesses the nature of these mergers, their character vis-à-vis ongoing development through phonetic approximation and/or lexical transfer, as well as their systemic motivations (external vs. internal). Furthermore, GOAT fronting has frequently been noted to occur in varieties of southern English (Docherty, 2010; Kerswill & Williams, 2005) and is said to be preceded by GOOSE fronting, aligning with Labov’s (1994) principle III of vowel change. This paper will therefore also explore the implications for both GOOSE and GOAT fronting in a dialect where the GOAT vowel remains split, and the GOOSE vowel is recorded as fronted, as in [ʊ], in traditional forms of the dialect.

Data from 18 speakers native to Lowestoft (north Suffolk) are drawn from phonologically controlled reading passages and the results of acoustic analysis of formant values (drawn from diphthongs at 25%, 50% and 75% points, and normalised using the Labov ANAE method). Results are presented according to gender and across three age categories. Preliminary findings highlight a change in progress where maintenance of the GOAT distinction is almost categorical for older speakers, gradient for middle speakers and lost for younger speakers; however, younger speakers are shown to maintain a contrast between ‘no’ [ʌu] (negative particle) and ‘no’ [ou] (adverbial) independently of the overall distinction.

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