Salience, noticeability and enregisterment of dialect features in Stoke-on-Trent English

This paper explores what non-linguists consider to be salient features of Stoke-on-Trent English. Although the meaning of salience has been a contested issue in linguistics, for sociolinguists “salience is tied with both noticeability and awareness of sociolinguistic variables” (Drager & Kirtley 2016: 16). Preston (1996; 2016) has discussed awareness and its various ‘modes’ amongst non-linguists, encompassing ‘availability’, ‘accuracy’, ‘detail’, and ‘control’. Noticeability seems to be a step prior to these ‘modes’ of awareness. According to Nycz (2016: 64), it is the “conscious awareness and subjective experience of a linguistic feature”, and can be affected by factors including localisedness, pitch, position, ‘surprisal value’ (i.e. unexpectedness), and speakers’ past experience (see Rácz 2013; Drager & Kirtley 2016; Hay, Drager & Gibson 2018). We explore and develop some of these ideas in this paper, using data from Stoke-on-Trent to further explore the concepts of salience and noticeability.

Stoke-on-Trent is a city in North Staffordshire, in the West Midlands of England. The city and the surrounding regions have been the subject of scattered linguistic research (e.g. Poole 1880; Nicholls 1934; Gibson 1955), but until Leach (2012; 2018) it had received no contemporary sociolinguistic attention. Despite this, the dialect of Stoke-on-Trent has been consistently singled out as “distinctly different” from that of other regions in texts offering general overviews of British varieties, such as Wells (1982) and Trudgill (1999).

The present study focusses on two pieces of perceptual fieldwork, the results of which enable exploration of (non-)salient of features of the Stoke-on-Trent dialect. The first, an online questionnaire conducted in 2013, saw 161 participants from Stoke-on-Trent and the surrounding region asked to list “specific pronunciations and words [they] would associate with the local accent”. The second arose from a real-time study of dialect perception, conducted in 2015, in which 113 listeners from around the country were asked to listen to a sample of Stoke-on-Trent speech (as part of a larger study reported in Montgomery & Moore 2018). As they listened participants were asked to click whenever they heard something they considered regional. They were then invited to add comments about why they clicked when they did, producing a time-aligned dataset of clicks and commentary.

In this paper, we compare the datasets, both of which provide information on overt awareness of features. We find similarities between respondents from Stoke-on-Trent and those from elsewhere, and across both experiments; for example, respondents consistently note /u:/ realisations of words such as book, look, and cook and variant PRICE vowels.

We also find important differences. The NURSE vowel is particularly salient in the real-time test for people outside Stoke-on-Trent, but it is not clicked by Stoke-on-Trent listeners, nor supplied in large numbers by respondents to the questionnaire. Such differences suggest important constraints on perceptions of salient features, and we discuss the effect of specific linguistic characteristics of particular feature tokens, features’ availability for overt comment, and the role of features that might be considered stereotypical of other varieties.
References


