Salience, identity and vowel change in Liverpool English
The case of nurse and happy
Levelling and the profile of Liverpool English

1. Dialect levelling involves reduction or elimination of marked (minority) variants through mutual convergence.
   - The outcome is a linguistic area with larger accent/dialect regions and fewer intra-regional differences than before.
   - Regional dialect levelling has been attested in Newcastle (Watt 2002), Hull, Reading, Milton Keynes (Williams and Kerswill 1999), Norwich (Trudgill 1999a) and other places.

2. LE (Scouse) is “very distinctive” (Trudgill 1999b: 70) and among the most heavily stigmatised varieties in the UK (Montgomery 2007)...

3. ...and could thus be seen as a prime candidate for levelling.
Many (older) Liverpudlians have the impression that Liverpool English is becoming more instead of less local:

“Some of the kids today are so uber-Scouse even I don’t understand what they’re saying” (male, MC, 59)

Watson (2007) provides evidence for this idea:

- traditional features such as TH-stopping or /r/-tapping are frequently retained by younger speakers
- stereotyped lenition of /k/ even increases
- “Scouse is, we might say, getting Scouser”

example: male, WC, 20
Research questions

1. Are young speakers at least as or 'more Scouse' with respect to other variables as well?
2. What is behind the rise of local features?
Variables

vowels

**happy-tensing**

*happy* realised with a tense [i] instead of a lax [ɪ]

less salient

(and also found elsewhere)

**NURSE-SQUARE merger** (towards [ɛ])

*fair* and *fur* are (near-)homophones for many Liverpool speakers

highly salient

(and largely restricted to Liverpool)

Database

“classical”, one-on-one sociolinguistic interviews

- free speech
- reading passage
- word list
- accent imitation

→ about 19 hours of speech and 8000 vowel measurements (normalised following Watt and Fabricius 2002)

Table: Age, gender, class of subjects

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Mean realisations

(a) happy

(b) NURSE
Stratification by class

(a) happy

(b) NURSE

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Interspeaker variation

Figure: NURSE-SQUARE pillai scores
Stratification by gender

Figure: NURSE
Salience

- social (and stylistic) stratification
  - little for happy across all speakers
  - more pronounced for NURSE, but decreasing in younger generation

- meta-linguistic awareness
  - no explicit comments about tense happy as a feature of Liverpool English
  - some conscious awareness of the NURSE-SQUARE merger, but again declining for the youngest speakers
    (higher awareness and some hypercorrection in middle-aged group; wear (male, 52, MC))

→ NURSE realisations becoming more local due to fading awareness?
Socioeconomic improvements

- post-WW2 revival, Beatles era
- unemployment, poverty, crime in the 1970s and 80s
- reorientation from the 1990s onwards
  - new economic focus on culture and tourism
  - physical regeneration of city centre, prestige projects
- European Capital of Culture 2008
  - positive media coverage increased
  - positive impressions about Liverpool in national surveys increased (Garcia, Melville, and Cox 2010)

→ „forward-looking self-promotion“ (Belchem 2006b)
→ Scouse now „cultivated“ as a „fashionable accessory“ (Belchem 2006a)
→ covert prestige of stereotypical Liverpool features
Reurbanisation

- 'official' Liverpool has been growing since 2001 (Office for National Statistics 2016)
- City centre population had already quadrupled in the 1990s (Belchem 2006c)

https://maps.cdrc.ac.uk
In the north, but not of it?

1 slightly diverging attitudes towards the larger region
   ■ older speakers often embrace the idea that Liverpool is culturally separate from both north and south (cf. Belchem 2006d)
   ■ middle-aged Liverpudlians think of Liverpool as special within the north of England
   ■ young Scousers are quite happy with a secondary identity as Northerners

2 ultra-lax happy variants have been attested in several northern cities (Stoddart, Upton, and Widdowson 1999; Watts 2006) and interpreted as a marker of distance to the south of England (Flynn 2010)

3 young Liverpool speakers are changing in the same direction, possibly for the same reasons
Conclusions

1. Nurse realisations are becoming more 'Scouse', possibly due to
   - declining salience
   - socioeconomic improvements

2. Happy is becoming less local in apparent time, presumably due to
   - changes in attitude towards Liverpool and the region

3. Division of work between salient and non-salient features
   - more salient variables are used to express local identity
   - less salient ones allow showing solidarity with larger region (without signalling disloyalty to local norms)

4. Scouse remains distinct while also participating in levelling to a (limited) extent


Watson, Kevin and Lynn Clark (2013). „How salient is the nurse square merger?“. In: English Language and Linguistics 17.2. 297–323.

Watt, Dominic (2002). „I don’t speak with a Geordie accent, I speak, like, the Northern accent: Contact-induced levelling in the Tyneside vowel system“. In: Journal of Sociolinguistics 6.1. 44–63.
