

# Salience, identity and vowel change in Liverpool English

The case of NURSE and happy

Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg



UNI  
FREIBURG



BICLCE 2017, Vigo  
28.09.2017

# Levelling and the profile of Liverpool English



- 1 dialect levelling involves reduction or elimination of marked (minority) variants through mutual convergence
  - 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



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- 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

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# 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?



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## 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)

(among others: Trudgill 1999b; Watson and Clark 2013; Honeybone and Watson 2013; Watson and Clark 2015; Juskan 2016)

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“classical”, one-on-one sociolinguistic interviews

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

	19-29		30-55		56-85	
	F	M	F	M	F	M
WC	2	2	2	2	1	1
MC	2	2	2	2	1	1

**Table:** Age, gender, class of subjects

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

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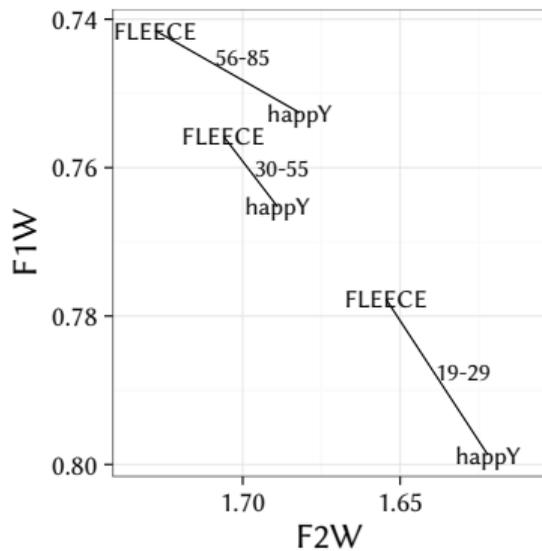
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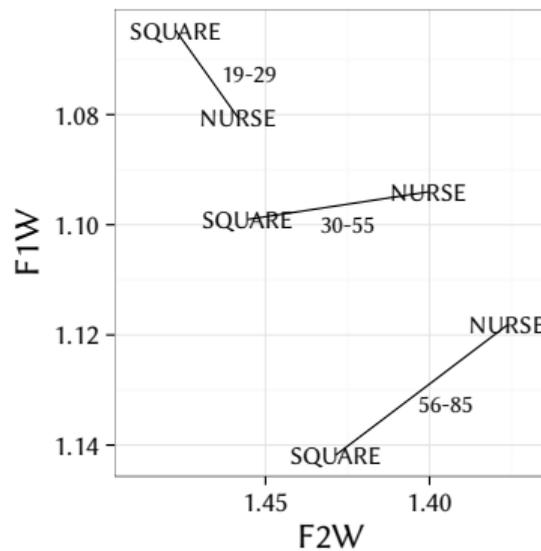
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# Mean realisations



(a) happy



(b) NURSE

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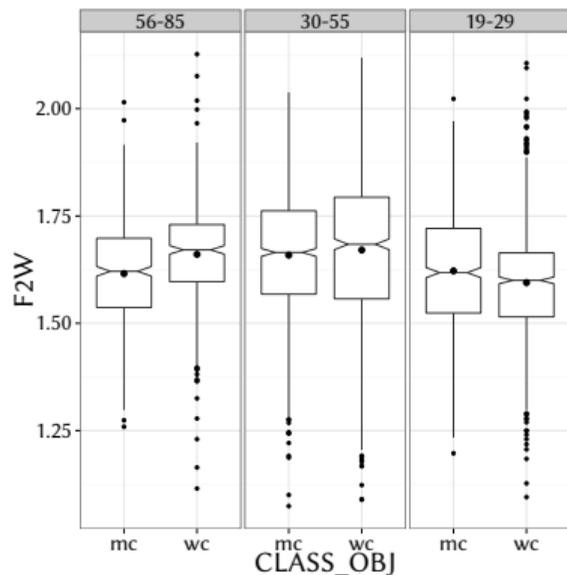
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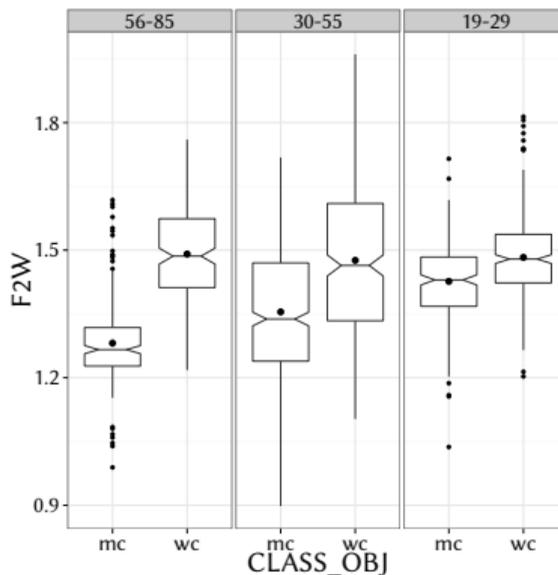
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# Stratification by class



(a) happy



(b) NURSE

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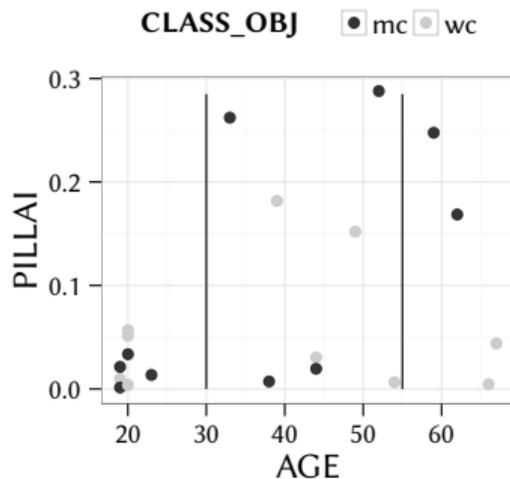


Figure: NURSE-SQUARE pillai scores

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# Stratification by gender

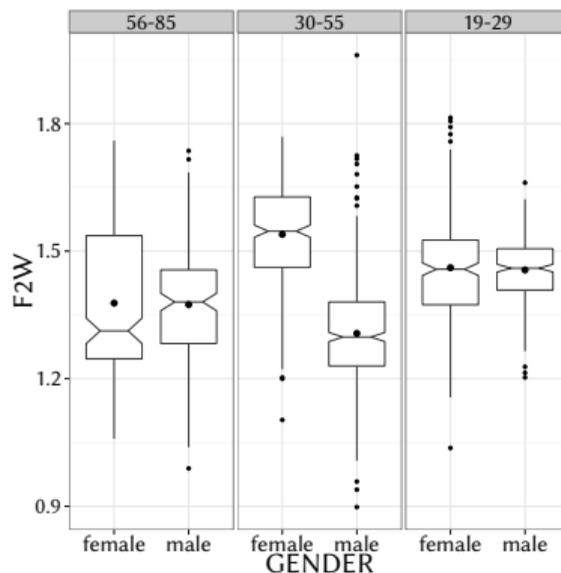


Figure: NURSE

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- 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?

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# 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

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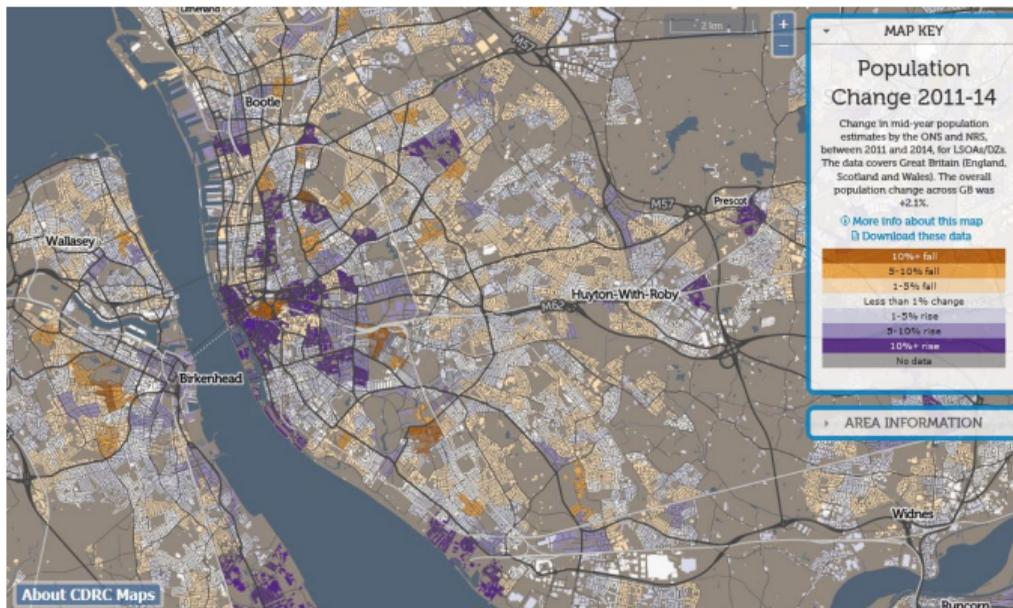
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# Reurbanisation



- ,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>

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# 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

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- 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

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