



1-1-1996

# Dialect Levelling, Koineisation and the Speech of the Adult Migrant

Paul Kerswill

---

# Dialect Levelling, Koineisation and the Speech of the Adult Migrant

# Dialect Levelling, Koinéisation and the Speech of the Adult Migrant

Paul Kerswill  
University of Reading

## 1 Dialect levelling and sociolinguistic structures

In this article, I present part of a wider study of dialect levelling in Norway and England. I shall discuss three questions: (1) is koinéisation, or new dialect formation, a phenomenon related to the levelling of differences between adjacent regional dialects? (2) Are koinéisation and levelling reflected in the simplificatory processes performed by adult migrants moving to a different dialect area? (3) Does koinéisation in a new town anticipate regional dialect levelling in its own area, and if so what contributes to the time-lapse between koinéisation and levelling?

I shall address this issue by comparing both koinéisation and levelling in two countries with rather different 'sociolinguistic structures', Norway and England. By sociolinguistic structures I mean (1) the extent of linguistic differences between varieties, (2) socio-demographic characteristics of the community, particularly in terms of urbanisation and social and geographical mobility, (3) the role of a standard variety, and (4) attitudinal factors relating to linguistic variety. Since I have treated the issue of sociolinguistic structure in these countries elsewhere (Kerswill 1996 (forthcoming)), I shall only present a brief sketch here. Norway is a highly developed country that still retains its traditional dialects, which may differ considerably from one another and from either of the two standard Norwegians, Bokmål and Nynorsk. Current attitudes towards non-standard speech are largely positive, particularly towards rural dialects, which are still very much in evidence outside the Oslo area. Tolerance of regional speech in schools has been official policy since an education act of 1878. There are certainly phonological and phonetic differences between Norwegian varieties, but the differences that most strike native speakers are in intonation and in the morpho-lexis. To give a flavor of the very extensive morpho-lexical differences, Table 1 shows differences in the noun morphology in two neighboring dialects, those of Bergen and of the rural districts outside Bergen. These dialect differences may be found over a distance of as little as five miles.

Stril	Bergen	Stril	Bergen
Definite singular		Indefinite and definite plural	
3 genders: m, f, (2 classes), n	2 genders: common, n	<i>indef:</i> <i>def:</i>	<i>indef.:</i> <i>def:</i>
m /kopən/ 'the cup'	c /kopən/	m & f: -ɑ/        -/ɑnə/ (most m)	common: -/ər/      -/ənə/
f1 /çy:rə/ 'the cow'	c /çy:rən/	-/ə/       -/ənɑ/ (most f)	-/ər/      -/ənə/
f2 /vɪ:su/ 'the ballad'	c /vɪ:sən/	n: Ø        -/ɛ/, -/ənɑ/	n: Ø, -/ər/   -/ənə/
n /hʉ:sə/ 'the house'	n /hʉ:sə/		

**Table 1: Noun morphology in Bergen and rural ('Stril') dialects  
(Kerswill 1994a: 47-8)**

In the southeast of England, the picture is very different. Here, there are few differences between the mainly urban dialects of quite a large area. According to work by Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle (1989), there are only a handful of non-standard features in this part of England, increasingly shared by all dialects there. These include those shown in Table 2.

i	Multiple negation: <u>We don't want none</u>
ii	Use of <u>ain't</u> for negative auxiliaries <u>isn't, aren't, hasn't, haven't</u>
iii	Past tenses of irregular verbs: <u>I done, I writ, I come</u>
iv	Use of <u>never</u> as past tense negative marker: <u>I never went there yesterday</u>
v	Use of <u>was</u> in singular and plural, but <u>weren't</u> in the neg.: <u>You was, I weren't</u>
vi	<u>them</u> as demonstrative adjective: <u>Look at them big spiders</u>
vii	Use of <u>what</u> as relative pronoun: <u>The film what was on last night was good</u>
viii	<u>there was</u> with plural notional subject: <u>There was some singers here a minute ago</u>
ix	Present participle <u>sat</u> and <u>stood</u> : <u>She was sat over there; he was stood in the corner</u>
x	Absence of plural marking on measures of distance and quantity: <u>two pound, ten mile</u>
xi	Absence of adverb marking: <u>he came really quick</u>

**Table 2: Some shared non-standard grammatical features in the southeast of England**

Much regional and social information is carried by low-level phonetic differences, affecting certain consonants and most vowels. Most urban varieties are strongly stigmatised, while the surviving rural varieties are regarded as increasingly exotic. Despite the British government's continued insistence on the testing of spoken Standard English in schools, attitudes towards regionally-colored speech are becoming somewhat more positive. The picture we have of the Southeast is of decreasing differences on both the social and regional fronts. If we stick to the accents of grammatically standard English used in the region, we can certainly apply the term 'Estuary English', coined by David Rosewarne in 1984, which seems to sum up the feeling many people, both lay and linguist, have about the set of increasingly similar accents to be heard there.

Despite the obvious differences in the histories of these two countries, I shall argue that they in fact have much in common. We return now to the main issue of the paper.

## 2 New towns and dialect levelling in western Norway

### 2.1 Odda and Tyssedal 'new towns'

Many sociolinguists have quoted Peter Trudgill's (1986) discussion of the levelling and simplification processes found in the Norwegian town of Høyanger. There is in the literature another, considerably clearer, example, that of the twin fjord towns of Odda and Tyssedal, founded a few kilometres apart in the second decade of the twentieth century. Table 3 shows the geographical origin of the first workers there, as well as some characteristic grammatical and morphological features of the two 'new' dialects. As can be

seen, the features used in the two dialects differ considerably, and their provenance is closely related to the origins of the populations in each town.

A Origin of people working at Odda Smelting Works in 1916 (from Sandve 1976: 19)

W. Norway	E. Norway	Norway (other)	Overseas
81%	5%	7%	7%

B Origin of people working at Tyssedal Aluminium Works in 1916-18 (from Sandve 1976: 23)

W. Norway	E. Norway	Norway (other)	Overseas
36%	35%	16%	12%

C Morphological features in Odda and Tyssedal, compared with typical west and east Norwegian forms

<u>Odda</u>	<u>Tyssedal</u>	<u>West Norwegian</u>	<u>East Norwegian</u>	
<i>i) Odda has West Norwegian, Tyssedal East Norwegian variant:</i>				
kasta	kastə	kasta	kastə	'throw' (infinitive)
jenta	jentə	jenta	jentə	'girl'
jentu	jenta	jentu	jenta	'the girl'
eg	jei	eg	jei	'I' (pronoun)
kvirt	virt	kvirt	virt	'white'
<i>ii) Both Odda and Tyssedal have levelled E. Norwegian/standard Bokmål or Nynorsk variant:</i>				
vi:	vi:	me:	vi:	'we'
alə	alə	adlə	alə	'all'
<i>iii) Simplified and/or intermediate forms:</i>				
kəmə	kəmɐ	çəmə	kəmɐ	'come' (present tense)
vegəɐ	vegɐɐ	vejjɐr	vegɐr	'walls'
elvəɐ/elvɐ	elvɐ	elvar	elvɐr	'rivers'

D Phonological changes in Odda and Tyssedal

These include the introduction of the standard Norwegian nine-monophthong system, replacing inventories with up to 13 monophthong phonemes

**Table 3: The development of dialect in Odda and Tyssedal (information derived from Sandve 1976)**

## 2.2 Recent dialect levelling in the western Norwegian region (Sandøy 1987)

To what extent are these features also found in dialect levelling in the region? Helge Sandøy reviews a number of studies carried out since the early 1970s. These agree on the following changes in rural dialects in the west of Norway:

- i simplification of the clusters /dl/, /dn/ to /l/, /n/
- ii reduction in number of vowel contrasts: /x/, /ø/ -> /ø/; /t/, /e/ -> /t/, /ø/, /o/ -> /o/, resulting in standard Norwegian 9 monophthong system
- iii loss of morphophonemic velar-palatal alternation in favor of velar: /veg/ 'wall', /vejær/ 'wall's; /tæk/ 'roof', /tææ/ 'the roof' -> /vegær/, /tækæ/
- iv partial loss of vowel change in present tense of strong verbs, including /tær/ for /tæk/ 'take' (present tense)
- v definite plural of neuter nouns joins feminine paradigm: /hææ/ 'the houses' -> /hææna/
- vi rapid loss of dialect vocabulary in favor of standard items

Except in the case of (v), these lead both to simplification and to levelling in the direction of both standards. Important for our discussion is that the first four of these are also found in Odda and Tyssedal, as Table 3 shows.

## 2.3 Simplification and levelling in the speech of Stril migrants in Bergen

We can now consider the process by which these changes take place by looking at the speech of adult internal migrants in the region. In a study of rural migrants in the city of Bergen (Kerswill 1994a), I found a wide variety of accommodatory behavior. This behavior included four of the changes already mentioned:

- i The simplification of the clusters /dn/, /dl/, and /bm/ to majority and standard forms /n/, /l/, and /m/ in e.g. traditional dialect /fidnɑ/, /adlɑ/, /kobmɑ/
- ii The avoidance of the vowels /ø/ and /æ/—overtly stigmatised, regionally very restricted: /gølv/ -> /golv/ 'floor'. This represents a reduction in the vowel phoneme inventory
- iii Loss of the morphophonemic velar-palatal alternation
- iv Loss of vowel change in present tense of strong verbs

These are all very similar to the changes shown in the two previous tables. Clearly, the fact that these people could acquire these features as adults is related to the simplicity of these features. For a further discussion of this relationship, see Kerswill (1995).

Dialect levelling in the old 'new towns' of Odda and Tyssedal is, then, similar to that found much more recently in the region as a whole: dialect contact in a new community, when left to its own devices as in Norway, mirrors dialect levelling processes occurring under quite different sociolinguistic circumstances. And we can see the process at work in the speech of adult migrants. But this is only a partial picture, since in most cases new towns are not at all isolated. In fact, according to Sandve, already by the 1970s Tyssedal was increasingly becoming more 'western' from its basically eastern base. This is doubtless because it is increasingly exposed to the regional levelling process. In terms of

traditional dialectology, it is in a sense returning to the Norwegian dialect continuum from which it had formerly been severed.

### 3 New towns and dialect levelling in southeastern England

#### 3.1 Dialect levelling in the southeastern region

I shall now explore this question of the blurring of new dialect formation and wider levelling tendencies by looking at a much more recent case in a more fluid dialect continuum with strong levelling tendencies. First, we consider the recent changes that have affected speech in the Southeast. This will allow us to see the 27-year-old new town of Milton Keynes in context. Non-standard grammatical features of the region have already been mentioned (Table 2). Phonological changes are shown in Table 4, in what I presume to be their order of generality (the most widespread is listed first).

##### *Consonants:*

- i glottal replacement of non-initial /t/
- ii vocalisation of non-initial /l/
- iii mergers of vowels before vocalised /l/ (/ʊz - ʊ - ɔ:/; /ɪz - ɪ/)
- iv fronting of /θ/ and non-initial /ð/ to merge with /f/ and /v/

##### *Vowels:*

- v examples from Reading, Berkshire (40 miles west of London):  
 /aʊ/: [ɛɪ] -> [əʊ] or [aə] (localised vowel replaced by RP/general S-E England)  
 /əʊ/: [əʊ] -> [ɛɪ], [ɛɪ] (/əʊ/-fronting; recent, general southeastern change, here affecting local vowel)  
 /aɪ/: [Δɪ - ɔɪ] -> [αɛ] (replacement of southwestern with London vowel)

**Table 4: Phonetic/phonological changes in southeastern non-standard accents,  
in putative decreasing order of age and generality**

All the consonantal changes seem to have originated in London; they are, after all, the archetypal features of Cockney. But the vowel changes are probably more recent. Significantly, they do not involve a wholesale adoption of working-class London vowels. Instead, they involve a move from a relatively localised to a more general, southeastern pronunciation that is not associated with London non-standard speech. Some of them seem, indeed, to be RP-influenced.

No systematic surveys of dialect levelling have been carried out (but see below, note 2). However, anecdotal evidence can be quite illuminating in understanding the mechanism behind levelling. In 1994, I happened to be having my hair cut in Amptill, a small country town between Bedford and Milton Keynes (about 10 miles from both). I talked to the barber, a man in his 40's who had been born above the shop, as had his father and grandfather. But this man sounded like a Londoner to me, though his accent was not broad. I asked about local speech – a topic that turned out to be of great interest to him. Many people, he volunteered, took him for a Cockney. The reason for that, he thought, was because he had gone to school with children from a London 'overspill'

estate in nearby Flitwick. He said, 'I went there speaking different from the rest. I had to change my language so that I didn't stand out from the crowd'. He had been forced to accommodate to the incomers, who brought with them a London-based variety.

### 3.2 The New Town of Milton Keynes

We shall now look at a contemporary 'new dialect' situation. Table 5 shows some details of the Milton Keynes project,<sup>1</sup> which was a quantitative study of young children's accent features in comparison with their parents'. The important factor here is to note that 76% of the incomers came from the southeast of England, and that just under half of these southeastern incomers came from London itself.

- Milton Keynes: a 'New Town' designated in 1969; 1969 population 43,000, 1991 population 176,000. 70 kms from London, Coventry and Cambridge. Migration mainly from southeast England, including London. London: 35%. Rest of Southeast: 41%.
- Subjects: ages 4, 8 and 12, girls and boys, 8 in each cell. Total 48 children, all MK born.
- One caregiver for each child – in almost all cases the mother.
- Three 'styles', each eliciting a set of target words: single word elicitation; connected speech task; reading list (not 4-year-olds).
- Research site: adjoining districts in the original part of the new town; largely rented accommodation in flats and terraced houses. This site was selected in the expectation of locating mainly nonstandards speakers.
- Families studied are from London, area immediately north of London, Essex, Milton Keynes area, and Scotland.

**Table 5: The Milton Keynes project**

There is space here just to look at one result. The vowel /aʊ/ shows the clear development of a particular set of norms in the new town. From the point of view of the present article, the issue is whether these norms differ in any way from changes we already know about from the region as a whole. Table 6 shows the four variants we felt we could reliably identify; unlike other vocalic variables in the study, these seem not to be arranged on a phonetic continuum.

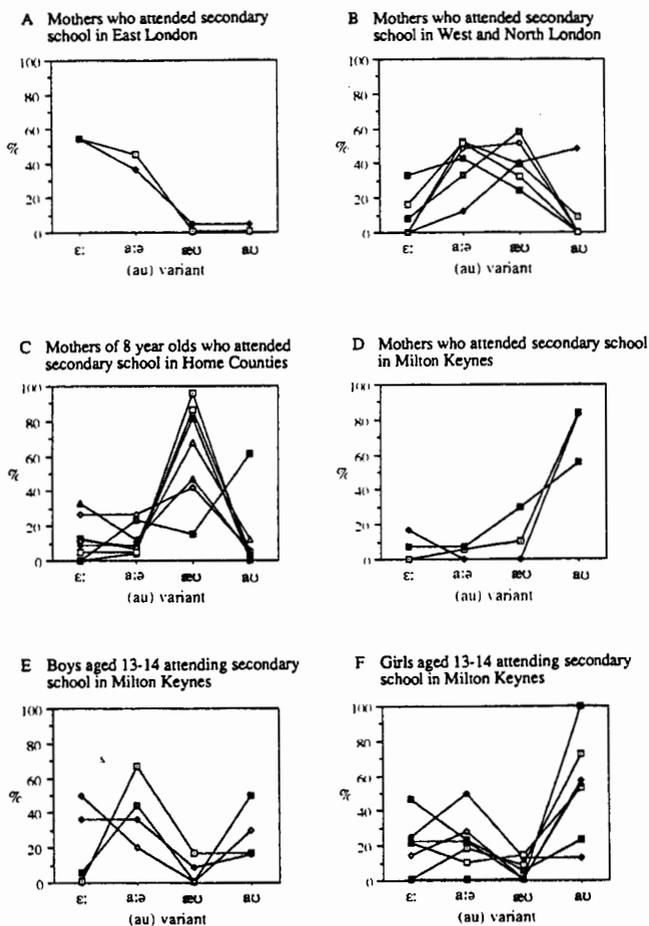
Variant A:	[e:]	(East London 1)
Variant B:	[æɔ]	(East London 2)
Variant C:	[æʊ]	(General London/Southeast)
Variant D:	[aʊ]	(Received Pronunciation)

**Table 6: Variants of (aʊ) (variable refers to /aʊ/)**

<sup>1</sup> 'A new dialect in a new city: children's and adults' speech in Milton Keynes', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, September 1990–February 1994, ref. R000232376. Research Fellow: Dr Ann Williams

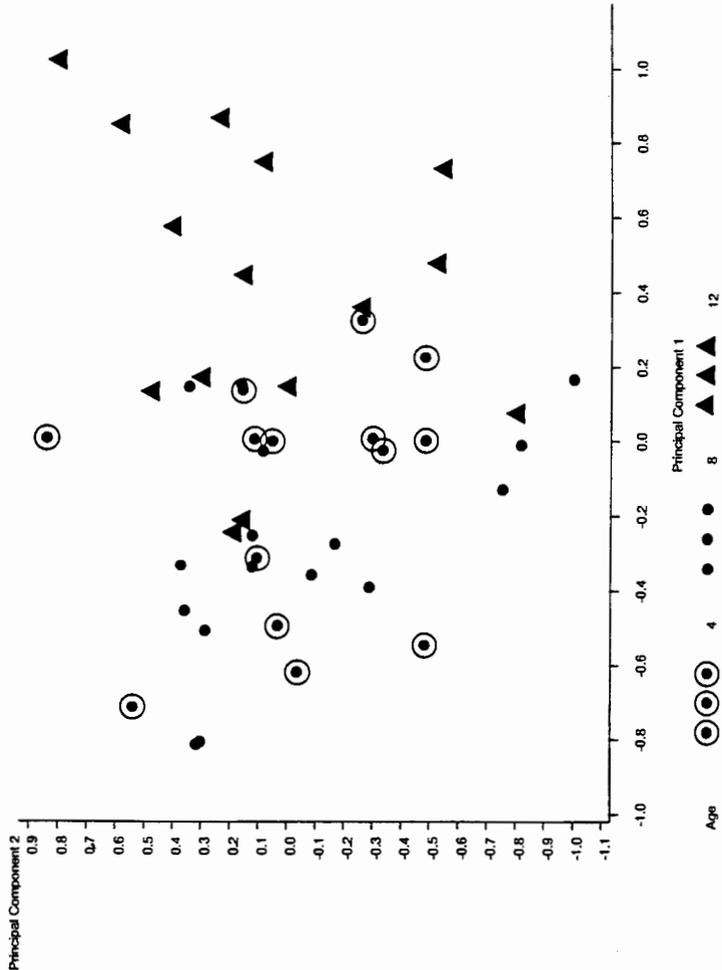
Figure 1 shows (1) that the mothers' use of (au) seems to coincide strikingly with their own regional origin. The two East Londoners (graph A) use mainly fronted monophthongal or mildly centring glides; those from elsewhere in London (graph B) use more of the front-to-back diphthong; those from outside London (graph C) use this diphthong almost exclusively. Lastly, those young mothers who went to secondary school in Milton Keynes seem to settle on an RP-like vowel. What of the children? The adolescent boys (graph E) have a different profile from any of the mothers, while, perhaps not surprisingly, the girls (graph F) have a profile not unlike the young mothers. The adolescent boys' and girls' data in a sense represent the new dialect of Milton Keynes.

**Figure 1: Use of (au) by mothers and older children, by location of secondary school (interview data)**



In fact, the claim that this age group represents the new dialect is corroborated by a Principal Components analysis of all the linguistic variables we studied, which included four consonants and six vowels. This technique takes the scores for all subjects and computes 'components', or dimensions, which serve to differentiate the subjects in an optimal way. Points on a scattergram show the position of each subject relative to the others; this allows us to look for groups of subjects, for which explanations can then be sought – in our case, in social terms. Figure 2 shows the result of this analysis.

**Figure 2: Principal components analysis of 10 variables  
(all subjects, first recordings, elicitation tasks)**



Since developmental factors may be relevant to the interpretation, the subjects are coded by age group. The figure shows that the four and eight year olds occupy roughly the same part of the graph. However, only the four year old group shows marked outliers: the child who scores highest on Component 2 still uses the Scots accent of his family, while the child at bottom left (at -0.55, -0.5) has London parents and uses strong London vowel features. What is of greatest interest, however, is the apparent shift of the twelve year olds upwards and to the right. There are two possibilities: either they have always had speech characteristics represented by their position, or they have themselves changed in recent years. The latter seems more likely: as children approach adolescence, they modify their speech (see, e.g., Chambers 1995: 169-176). In fact, it has been claimed that adolescents represent the age group that most influences language change (Aitchison 1992). This apparent shift is arguably the result of these near-adolescents' homing in on a Milton Keynes variety.

### 3.3 Milton Keynes and dialect levelling

In Milton Keynes, we have certainly identified features belonging to the new, non-standard variety. But it is very difficult to say that they differ in any marked way from features found elsewhere, in Reading, London, etc. Dialect contact, such as we find in Milton Keynes, has much the same consequences as the regional dialect levelling in the Southeast. But it does seem to us that the non-standard dialect of Milton Keynes is considerably less broad, less local than that of either Reading or London itself: British linguists I have played tapes to are surprised at how 'middle class' the child speakers sound by comparison with other children with similar backgrounds elsewhere. People in Milton Keynes sometimes talk about 'Milton Keynes Cockney'; however, Cockney it is not, as witnessed by the fact that the boy who had very marked London features, born as he was of East London parents, is a statistical outlier, as we have seen.

## 4 Conclusion

What characterises this new new town as opposed to the older Norwegian new towns is precisely the absence of regionally marked features. In Norway, the dialect contact gave rise to genuinely new forms, which remained markers of two new, but soon highly focused local urban dialect in a sea of rural dialects. In Milton Keynes, the degree of contact, mobility and social fluidity of the whole region means that any new forms are likely to be shared by other towns in the region. What we can say is that the high-contact Milton Keynes case is that it seems to represent accelerated dialect levelling. If this is so, its cause would be the exceptional sociolinguistic situation there: unlike most towns, the children have no significant contact with speakers of an older local variety. The situation is reminiscent of cases of creolisation where continuity of language transmission has been lost – though in Milton Keynes we are dealing with regionally marked phonological subsystems and not a whole language.

The issue of the relationship between community types and dialect levelling is being addressed in a new project,<sup>2</sup> which will be informed by the insight, discussed in this

<sup>2</sup> 'The role of adolescents in dialect levelling', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ref. R000236180), September 1995–August 1998. Investigators: A. Williams (Research Fellow), P. Kerswill

article, that levelling is related to the linguistic adjustments people at different ages are able to perform. Since migration is initially performed by adults, we can expect simplification to form part of the dialect levelling process, though we cannot discount processes of divergence, too.

## References

- Aitchison, Jean (1992). "Kiddies rule, OK?" Paper presented at Sociolinguistics Symposium 9, University of Reading, April 1992.
- Chambers, Jack (1995). *Sociolinguistic Theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Cheshire, Jenny, Edwards, Vivienne and Whittle, Pamela (1989). "Urban British dialect grammar: the question of dialect levelling." *English World Wide* 10:185-225.
- Kerswill, Paul E. (1994). *Dialects Converging: Rural speech in urban Norway* (Oxford: OUP).
- Kerswill, Paul E. (1995). "Children, adolescents and language change." in Paul Kerswill, Richard Ingham, Yan Huang & Linda Shockey, eds., *Reading Working Papers in Linguistics* 2:201-222. (Department of Linguistic Science, University of Reading).
- Kerswill, Paul E. (1996 forthcoming). "Dialect contact and sociolinguistic structures in Norway and England." *Sociolinguistica* 10 (special volume, Peter Auer and Frans Hinskens, eds., 'Social dialectology: convergence and divergence of dialects in a changing Europe').
- Rosewarne, David (1984). "Estuary English." *The Times Educational Supplement*, 19th October.
- Sandøy, Helga (1987). *Norsk dialektkunnskap* (Oslo: Novus).
- Trudgill, Peter (1986). *Dialects in Contact* (Oxford: Blackwell).

---

and J. Cheshire. The project investigates levelling in Milton Keynes, Reading and (in the north of England) Hull. The hypothesis tested is that levelling is more advanced in fluid new towns and in open networks than in well established old towns and in localised networks.