Mobility versus Social Class in Dialect Levelling: Evidence from New and Old Towns in England

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ABSTRACT

This article takes as irs point of departure the Milroys' model of class and social network, in which there is a complementarity between class and network: more mobile individuals tend to be middle, not working class. We examine data suggesting that, in fact, social class and social network structure are independent, not necessarily complementary factors. We do this by comparing data from a 'typical' low-mobility, low-status group in a well-established English town, Reading. with data from a high-mobility, but low-status group in an English 'New Town', Milton Keynes. Sociolinguistic patterns show that, as expected, the high-mobility Milton Keynes group use a more levelled variety than the low-mobility Reading group, but that the Milton Keynes group nevertheless remains strongly non-standard and non-Received Pronunciarion in its speech. (Keywords: sociolinguistics, social class, social network, social and geographical mobility).

RESUMEN

En este trabajo se parte del modelo de clases y redes sociales establecido por James y Lesley Milroy y se cuestiona la complementariedad de ambos factores, en el sentido de que los hablantes con mayor movilidad no suelen pertenecer a las clases trabajadoras, .sino a la clase media. Nuestro estudio sugiere que los dos factores (clase social y red social) pueden ser

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independientes y no siempre actúan de manera complementaria. Esta conclusión se aprecia después de contrastar los datos obtenidos de un grupo de informantes procedentes de la ciudad de Reading, de estatus social bajo y escasa movilidad, con los obtenidos en una ciudad nueva, como Milton Keynes, de hablantes también de clase social baja, pero con mayor nivel de movilidad. Los estructura sociolingüística resultante en cada caso muestra, como era de esperar, que el grupo de hablantes con mayor movilidad tiende a usar variantes más uniformes que los informantes de Reading, con menor movilidad, aunque los primeros mantengan más características subestándar y una pronunciación más alejada del RP. (Palabras Clave: sociolingüística, clase social, red social, movilidad geográfica y social).

I. INTRODUCTION: CLASS, NETWORK AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

This article addresses the social context of internal migration as a force for the convergence of language varieties. That migration should he such a force has long been recognised, since it is clear that contact hetween speakers leads to short and long-term changes in their speech which in turn have consequences for the language varieties themselves. Clearly, this dialect contact is emhedded in wider social structures and we need to know why changes happen in a particular place and time and not another. One of the niost important contributions to the understanding of the social emhedding of language change in recent years has been the proposal by the Milroys, in their 1992 article, to combine the two fundamental concepts of social class and social network into a unified social theory which will account for language variation and change. It is our aim in the present paper to show that the relationship between class and network that they propose needs modification to take account of highly mobile, hut by no means socially marginal, groups of internal migrants whose sociolinguistic patterns are not normally considered in speech community studies (though see Kerswill 1993).

We begin by briefly presenting the Milroys' position. Linguists, they maintain, have been unreflecting and uncritical in their adoption of frameworks for stratifying and classifying groups within society. The consensus model (Durkheim and Talcott Parsons), favoured by Lahov, is based on a view of society as an integrated whole in which the different parts work in harmony with one another. Linguistically tliis should give rise to shared norms of evaluation and cohesive speech communities. The consensus view is limited, however, by its inability to account for the dynamic nature and continued vitality of non-standard vernaculars and therefore is unable to provide an explanation for linguistic change. Such phenomena can he better understood, according to the Milroys, by adopting as a framework the Marxian conflict model which takes account of the inequalities, divisions and opposing interests found within society. This model shows how varieties other than standard, legitimised varieties persist strongly and act as hadges of identity for less privileged groups.

Social network theory also provides an explanation for the maintenance of non-standard dialects. Close-knit networks act as powerful norm-enforcement mechanisms, if we consider norms as representing the accepted or unmarked patterns of behaviour in a community. Strong networks both bind a local community together and reduce the possibility of changes in heliaviour, including linguistic behaviour. The interaction between social network and social class can be seen when one considers that close-knit networks in the West are to he found mainly at the two extremes of the socio-economic scale. Thus, the least powerful and the most powerful maintain strong social networks – the former because of the *need* to maintain such

ties for survival. the latter in order to reaffirm their exclusivity. The majority of speakers. however, who fall hetween the two poles. do not have the need for strong networks and come into contact with a wider range of people.

Within all groups in society. it is, according to the Milroys. individuals who establish large numbers of weak ties outside their immediate communities who are able to facilitate language chanye. Concomitantly, the transmission of innovations between groups is effected by such individuals. They cite this as a likely explanation for the rapid spread of changes in phonological features in Britain. We would infer from this (and this is relevant to the present article) that the spread of changes occurs more rapidly in socially and geographically mobile groups. especially migrants. than in groups with a strong local base and close-knit networks.

Finally. the Milroys propose an alternative to a social class analysis of society, using the Danish sociologist. Thomas Højrup's model of *life-modes*. We have already mentioned the inverse correlation between social network strength and social class: a life-mode analysis is an attempt to explain why this should be so. In Højrup's schema. the population is divided into subgroups. or 'life-modes'. which share certain social and economic characteristics and lifestyles.

Højrup's life-modes (after Milroy & Milroy 1992)

Life-mode 1 groups workers who are self-employed in small family-run businesses such as farming or fishing in rural areas, and corner shops or restaurants in urban environments. Intent on maintaining a successful enterprise. they tend to make little distinction between work and leisure and have a strong solidarity ethic.

Life-mode 2 comprises wage earners and employees. These workers do not share the strong commitment to work of the life-mode 1 members; for them a job is the means to the achievement of meaningful free time and leisure. There is no ideology of solidarity as in life-mode 1. but solidarity emerges in this group in the face of difficulties and lack of resources. These conditions give rise to the traditional close-knit neighbourhoods of the working class. If a family's income rises, the need for networks to provide support mechanisms is reduced. The family becomes materially hetter off and may move out of the neighbourhood to better accomrnodation. The solidarity ethic apparently disappears, only to surface again in times of industrial strife.

Life-mode 3 members are also wage earners but they see their goal as rising up the hierarchy of the organisation for which they work. This group includes professional people such as doctors. lawyers. lecturers and managers. For them. work is rneaningful in itself and the individual is prepared to work long hours and move long distances to fulfill ambitions. As a result. their networks are primarily loose-knit.

Later, we argue that social mobility does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with a middle class (that is. life-mode 3) way of life: as we shall see. the effects on language of mobility and class can be separated. necessitating a more suhtle model that includes a recognition of class-based cultural and attitudinal difference that cuts across network types and life-modes.

II. THE DIALECT LEVELLING PROJECT[1]

To illustrate these points. we present some preliminary results from an ESRC project (see note 1) which aims to elucidate the relationship between social class. demography and geographical distance from London in the promotion of the dialect levelling that is currently taking place in England.

The project has three premises:

1. In areas of high population movenient there may he rapid changes in dialect and accent features. including levelling.
2. Menibership of a close-knit. stable social network with strong local ties leads to linguistic confomiity (i.e. not 'stepping out of line') and inhibits change.
3. Language change is most visible through the comparison of teenage language with (a) older adults' speech and (b) the speech of younger children.

The three English towns chosen for the research differed in terms of the amount of in-migration they had experienced over the past 30 years and in their distance from London, which is held to he the origin of many of the phonological changes in English regional varieties today (see Tahle 1). Selecting these towns allowed us to investigate the effects of these two factors quantitatively. Our expectation was that the greater amount of social mobility in Milton Keynes. and consequent absence of close social networks. would correlate with more rapid dialect levelling than would be the case in Reading with its more stable population.

Table 1: Summary of demographic characteristics of Hull, Reading and Milton Keynes				
Centres	New Town?	Close to London?	Population in 1991	Population Change 1981-1991
Hull	no	no (340 kms.)	254,000	-8.7%
Reading	no	yes (60 kms)	129,000 (not counting Wokingham)	-5.1% (increased with Wokingham added)
Milton Keynes	yes founded in 1976 (pop. 44,000)	yes (70 kms)	176,000	+39.2%

Choice of districts within each town
A major part of the research was the targeting of not one. but two districts in each town which corresponded to what might be roughly termed 'working class' and 'middle class' areas. The aim was to test the Milroys' assertion that more affluent groups would have qualitatively different network patterns from the less affluent. The initial selection of the districts was based mainly on our own detailed local knowledge of each town. Having chosen the districts, schools were then approached.

III. DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OLD AND NEW TOWNS

Interviews and group discussions were conducted with 32 adolescents (8 boys and 8 girls from working class and middle class schools) in each town. as well as with elderly residents and young children. The adolescents read word lists and took part in discussions on linguistic issues. Information was collected on their life-styles, in-school and out-of-school activities. family contacts. friendship patterns. tastes in music. magazines, clothes, sporting activities. and perceptions of different groups within the broader teenage culture. The data is being analysed in order to achieve an ethnographic profile of each individual. Data on the adolescents' parents' origins are shown in Table 2.

The table suggests that the middle class families have a good deal in common in that few of the parental generation were born in the town where they now live. These parents. almost all of whom were in the professions and senior managerial positions. had moved to Milton Keynes or Reading for work-related reasons. Most had higher education and it was expected that their children would go on to university. Few had extended family living locally. Such families would be typical of Højrup's life-mode 3.

In contrast. the Reading working class school is in an area where family ties are evidently closely maintained. The housing estate where it is located was developed from the 1920s onwards as an area with a high concentration of social housing. Under certain circumstances it is possible for people to inherit the right to a particular council house from their parents – a practice which promotes the continuity of families living in the same area. It is in this kind of area that close knit networks would have been formed. especially at times of high unemployment. This particular council estate could be seen as solidly life-mode 2 with some life-mode 1 families interspersed.

What can be said about the Milton Keynes working-class areas? Although we have not yet analysed the social data gathered from our subjects. we can infer a great deal about it from our previous project which was located in a neighbouring. socially similar area.' In a previous paper (Williams & Kerswill 1997). we discussed the low level of social cohesion and the hiph level of geographical mobility of the families studied. For example. we noted statements such as the following (taken from interviews with the niothers of the children we recorded):

> 'It took me about two years to even speak to someone. After the first year I was cracking up. I just wanted to go back. I hated it. Nobody had been born in Milton Keynes. Everybody had come from somewhere else. You had them from everywhere – London, Scotland. Ireland. And if you didn't come down with them ... they stuck to their own groups'

> 'They [the neighbours] only spoke to me once and that was to complain'

> 'I love it here. It's the best thing I've ever done. I'm not one for popping in for cups of tea here and there. After all the years I've been on this estate. I've only got two friends'

> (Williams & Kerswill 1997)

Table 2: Origins of adolescents in four schools in Reading and Milton Keynes							
A: READING, Middle Class				**B: READING, Working Class**			
	Born	Mother from	Father From		Born	Mother from	Father from
Girls 1	**Reading**	Barbados	Barbados	Girls 1	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
2	Warrington	Yorkshire	Yorkshire	2	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
3	**Reading**	Essex	Essex	3	**Reading**	Guyana	Guyana
4	**Reading**			4	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
5	I. of Wight	**Reading**	I. of Wight	5	Germany	India	**Reading**
6	**Ascot**	London	Portsmouth	6	**Reading**	Cambridge	**Reading**
7	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Tadley**	7	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
8	**Reading**	Watford	Yorkshire	8	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
Boys 1	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**	Boys 1	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
2	Slough	**Reading**	Somerset	2	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
3	**Reading**	Wolverh'ton	London	3	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
4	**Reading**	Sussex	Hastings	4	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
5	Hillingdon	Hastings	**Reading**	5	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
6	**Reading**	Newcastle	Newcastle	6	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
7	London	London	London	7	**Reading**	**Reading**	**Reading**
8	**Reading**	Germany	devon	8	**Reading**	**Reading**	Ireland
C: MILTON KEYNES, Middle Class				**D: MILTON KEYNES, Working Class**			
	Born	Mother from	Father from		Born	Mother from	Father from
Girls 1	**M Keynes**	Newbury	St Helena	Girls 1	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland
2	**M Keynes**	London	Leeds	2	**M Keynes**	Halifax	London
3	Oxford	Oxford	Oxford	3	Luton	Portsmouth	Watford
4	**M Keynes**	Lowestoft	**Bletchley**	4	London	London	London
5	Cranfield	Leicester	**Bucks.**	5	**M Keynes**	**Bletchley**	**Bletchley**
6				6	Lancashire	Lancashire	Liverpool
7	Glasgow	Inverness	Inverness	7	Blackpool	London	
8	**M Keynes**	Kenya	Kenya	8	**Bletchley**	Stevenage	Ireland
Boys 1	Birkenhead	Birkenhead	Birkenhead	Boys 1	**M Keynes**	**Bletchley**	**Bletchley**
2	London	Luton	Luton	2	London	Essex	London
3	Kent	Manchester	Dorset	3	**M Keynes**	London	London
4	Aylesbury	Poland	Manchester	4	**M Keynes**	GtYarmouth	Ireland
5	**N'hampt'n**	**N Pagnell**	**N Pagnell**	5	Newbury	Newbury	Tadley
6	Bristol	Bristol	Manchester	6	Ireland	Halifax	Ireland
7	**N'hampt'n**	Newcastle	North	7	**M Keynes**	London	London
8	Brighton	Northants	Leicester	8	**M Keynes**	London	Jamaica
Note: Places within 15 kms. of the current place of residence are given in bold type.							

We also noted the great willingness with which sonie people moved: while almost all families had moved at least once within Milton Keynes. three families had moved six. seven and nine times. respectively.

Despite this apparent lack of social cohesion. there was another tendency. albeit found among a miiiority of the families in our sample. This was the practice of moving to Milton Keynes as an extended family, with two adult generations, or perhaps sihlings. moving toyether. These people were able to reproduce the family support mechanisms of their former home towns. the lack of which was noted by other people we interviewed.

Despite this presence of this practice. the picture of working-class Milton Keynes life is different horh from middle-class life-styles in Milton Keynes and working-class life-styles in Reading. a fact which makes it difficult to fit this group into a Højrupian life-mode. What the Milton Keynes working-class group does share with the middle-class groups. however. is an orientation towards people and places elsewhere – usually. home town and kin. Like the life-mode 3 professionals. they have moved considerable distances to live where they are now – although the motivation was usually hetter housing. not better employment prospects. Again. like life-mode 3 people. they do not seem ro form close-knit territorially bounded groups with mutual dependency. However. as already noted these migrants do not fit into any of the Højrupian life-modes. In terms of occupation. they belong mostly to life-mode 2. Yet the formation of cloae-knit networks seems not to occur: either by choice or compulsion, they keep themselves to themselves. despite (in some cases) unemployment and poverty. Thus. we have an economically deprived life-mode 2 group who seem to prefer the geopraphical mobility and the loose network patterns typical of people in life-mode 3.

This type of social network is common to migrants everywhere (Kerswill 1994). and as such should not surprise us. It is one which. if the Milroys' thesis is right. will Iead to an openness to language change. We now consider some results.

IV. LEVELLING VS. CONSERVATISM IN MILTON KEYNES AND READING

We begin by considering the vowel (aɪ). which occurs in words like *time, night.* etc. In vernacular speech in the south of England. it has a ranye of variants. including [aɪ] (similar to that used in Received Pronunciation. or 'RP'). [ɑɪ], [ɑɪ], [ɔɪ], [ʌɪ] and [ʌɪ]. There are also variants with a lengthened tirst element. which could be transcrihed [ɑˑɪ] and a monophthongal [a:] – both the latter associated with vernacular London speech. Table 3 shows the distribution of these variants in the speech of working-class suhjects (we choose this group hecause any converyence is likely to be more visible than in the speech of the linguistically more uniform middle-class): eight girls. eight boys and four native-born elderly residents of Milton Keynes.

Table 3: Percentage use of variants of (aɪ), Milton Keynes working-class group (interview with fieldworker)						
	[aɪ]	[ɑ̧ɪ]	[ɑɪ]	[ɔɪ]	[ʌɪ]	[ʌɪ]
Girls (n=8)	25	45	29	1	-	-
Boys (n=8)	1	38	60	-	-	-
Elderly (n=4)	-	-	24	57	15	3

The table does not show that many of the teenagers' vowels have the lengthened onset characteristic of London (a point that could be investigated instrumentally). However, the most striking feature is the rather small overlap between the distributions of the older and younger speakers: we return to this apparent lack of continuity below.

Table 4: Percentage use of variants of (aɪ), Reading working-class group (interview with fieldworker)						
	[aɪ]	[ɑɪ]	[ɑɪ]	[ɔɪ]	[ʌɪ]	[ʌɪ]
Girls (n=8)	3	21	45	21	4	5
Boys (n=8)	1	19	64	14	3	-
Elderly (n=4)	-	12	48	22	2	16

Table 4 shows the distribution of the same variants in Reading. By contrast with Milton Keynes. we see that there is rather little evidence of change over two generations. The predominant variant is a fully back. diphthongal |ɑɪ|, with a small number of fronted and a larger number of back-raised variants. These variants are sometimes stereotyped as 'rural' in the south of England, and contribute to the perception of the Reading accent as coming from much further west. and therefore supposedly rural. than it does.

       We turn now to (aʊ), as in *round. house. now*. which. unlike (aɪ), shows strong evidence of undergoing rapid levelling in southern England generally, with the attrition of regional variants in favour of the RP-like [au]. Tables 5 and 6 show the distribution of variants found in our Milton Keynes and Reading samples. respectively.

Table 5: Percentage use of variants of (aʊ), Milton Keynes, interview style						
	[ɛː]	[aːə]	[æʊ]	[aʊ]	[ɛʊ]	[ɛɪ]
Girls (n=8)	-	6	5	89	-	-
Boys (n=8)	-	12	4	83	-	-
Elderly (n=4)	10	-	1	-	63	26

Table 6: Percentage use of variants of (aʊ), Reading, interview style						
	[ɛː]	[aːə]	[æʊ]	[aʊ]	[ɛʊ]	[ɛɪ]
Girls (n=8)	-	8	-	90	-	2
Boys (n=8)	-	6	-	87	4	3
Elderly (n=4)	3	-	4	1	53	38

For both towns. there is a near-categorical shift away from a localised form to a non-localised. standard-like one – a clear and dramatic instance of dialect levelling. This is in direct contrast to the pattern for (aɪ), where we saw levelling taking place in Milton Keynes but to a much lesser extent in Reading. However. there is a crucial difference between the two towns: while the shift for (au) is (we believe) total in Milton Keynes. this is not so in the working-class district of Reading. where perhaps 10 per cent of the children *occasionally* use the old variants.

This difference is easily explainable in terms of differences in network structure. along the lines discussed earlier. In another paper (Kerswill & Williams 3000. fc), we took a similar approach. though we focussed on chronological continuities and breaks. We proposed a principle of 'koineisation' stating that. in new towns. there is no continuity across generations. This is clearly true of Milton Keynes: most youngsters there have no family contact with elderly native residents of the area. while this is not at all true of Reading. where we often find three generations living on the same estate.

The figures as presented above in fact obscure two other patterns. The first is that. in the intermediate generation of people native to the Milton Keynes area (those born between the 1940s and 1960s). the variant [æʊ]. virtually absent in the oldest and youngest speakers. is the single most common variant (see Kerswill & Williams 1994: 22; Kerswill 1996b). Clearly factors we are not in a position to discover at the moment are at work. The second observation is that the transcription [aʊ] subsumes a number of potentially distinct variants. One of these we believe to be both innovative and sociolinguistically salient. The possibly new variant is a fully hack [ɑu]. or even [ɒu]. We noted it in both Milton Keynes and Reading. and we would speculate that it is used more hy white children whose friendship groups include young people of African Caribbean origin.

Finally. we can mention two as yet unquantified observations relating to the vowels of Milton Keynes and Reading. The first concerns the vowel (ʌ). as in *cup*. Trudgill has found that this vowel is being progressively fronted in the area directly east and north-east of London. the degree of fronting being greater the closer the location is to London (Trudgill 1986: 51). We have found no evidence of this whatsoever in either Milton Keynes (north-west of London) or Reading (west of London). On the contrary. we have noted sorne very back variants in both towns. but especially in Milton Keynes. Pronunciations such as [kʌzn] for *cousin* or [bɹʌvɑ] for *brother* are common, with the symbol [ʌ] standing not for its (centralised) RP value but its fully back cardinal value. The hack vowel is. we believe. an innovation and. like the back variant of (au), may he associated with peer groups which include African Caribbean speakers. For Reading teenagers. fronted [a] or [a̠] for /ʌ/ belong to the stereotype of Cockney speech.

The second observation concerns a conservative trait of Reading speech. This is a central pronunciation of /ɑː/ in words like *last. bath. park*. This is fairly prevalent in the Reading teenagers' speech. who will often say [laːs nɔɪʔ] for *last night*. Strangely, the fronting is less pronounced among the elderly speakers: it is almost as though this feature has been seized upon as a marker of local identity by the young – though we have no evidence yet that this is so.

CONCLUSION: Social Network and Class Culture as Independent Influences on Language Change

In our previous project. we suggested that a numher of phonological variables show evidence of levelling in Milton Keynes. For some features, especially vowels. the levelling is towards an RP-like norm: for others, especially consonants. it is towards a generalised southern non-standard norm. We suggested at the time that these results were due to (1) the mutual accommodation that comes ahout in a demographic melting-pot such as this. and (2) the continued contact that the town has had with other places since its initial establishment. The

results we have presented in this article confirm these findings. The comparison of Milton Keynes with Reading allows us to say with more certainty that it is open networks with many links to people elsewhere that allow the levelling to take place.

But to return to the title of the paper: we believe that the data shows that mobility and social class are two separate influences. On the basis of the Reading data only. one might conclude that high niobility and low social class are mutually exclusive: both the social and the linguistic data are consistent with this conclusion. One would conclude that the middle-class children's use of standard English grammatical forms and near-RP vowels (not discussed here) is due to the greater susceptibility to standardisation which is characteristic of their open social networks. rather than the result of their social class and the different norms that apply there. The tendency towards non-regional norms perceptible in the working-class Milton Keynes youngsters. however, should not be over-estiniated. In this group, non-RP phonology is still the norm. as is non-standard grammar. This occurs *despire* the open. loose-knit networks with many contacts outside the town that are contracted by the Milton Keynes working-class subjects. We must then ask why non-standard forms persist in the speech of Milton Keynes youngsters as strongly as they do. We believe there is a difference in culture: ethnopraphic interviews with youngsters of both classes in both these towns and in Hull suggest a strong class awareness (Kerswill & Williams 1997). In fact. the main divide they perceived was 'class'. with strong statements being niade by the working-class teenagers against 'posh' people. Within such working-class families. mobility does not imply an openness to standardisation, despite the Milroys' claim: class-based cultural differences coiicerning literacy as well as relationships with schools. authorities and employers may be niaintained in a migrant population such as that in Milton Keynes. Thus. we would like to arpue that class-based norms directly affect a person's willingness to adopt standard English and RP pronunciations. without the necessary mediation of networks.

A life-mode analysis is clearly very useful: however. the link that the Milroys make between class and network is possibly more subtle than they had supposed. Class-based culture can have a direct effect on standardisation. quite independently of niobility and open networks.

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