VARIATION IN TRADITIONAL COCKNEY AND POPULAR LONDON SPEECH
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Abstract: In this paper I examine recordings of two elderly Londoners, one male and one female, in an attempt to show the range of variation that can be found in the traditional speech of London as regards typical features such as H-dropping, TH-fronting, T-glottalling and L-vocalization. The female speaker lacks some of the traits that are generally considered characteristic of Cockney.

Keywords: English dialectology, English sociolinguistics, Cockney, Popular London speech.

1. Introduction

Strictly speaking, Cockney is the basilectal extreme of the popular speech of London, used in an imprecise area north of the River Thames referred to as the East End. The traditional core neighbourhoods of the East End are Bethnal Green, Stepney & Poplar (since 1965 forming the borough of Tower Hamlets), Shoreditch, Hackney, Mile End and Bow, and a little further south, nearer the river, Spitalfields, Whitechapel, Wapping, Limehouse and Millwall. Nowadays, certain areas south of the river (Southwark, Bermondsey and Walworth) are also strongly associated with Cockney speech. However, probably most of the time these days, the term "Cockney" is used loosely to include any working-class London accents that deviate noticeably from the standard (RP or SSB, as it is variously called). Among these, the varieties that are closer to RP might be more accurately termed Popular London Speech (PLS).

Cockney in its broadest sense is claimed to have had an influence on the speech of other areas, and not only areas close to London, like Essex and the Home Counties: some phonetic phenomena traditionally associated with the speech of London have also arisen further afield, in other parts of England and Scotland and, rightly or wrongly, been attributed to influence of the metropolis. For example, TH-Fronting, a merger most likely due to the phonological markedness of [θ] and [ð] as compared to [f] and [v] (Kerswill, 2003: 240), has been recorded in Glasgow (among other places), and Glaswegian speech containing this feature is sometimes referred to humoristically as Jockney. Glottalization is now found in the speech of

Liverpool, and is in fact even more widespread nowadays than before among young speakers in London in general. The type of regional speech as a whole which has incorporated features of the London variety is sometimes referred to as Estuary English.

In London itself, Cockney and PLS today are spoken among many other linguistic varieties, so we can expect to find influence from these. For instance, the speech of young Inner-London speakers, through contact with British Caribbean English and L2 Englishes, is now characterized by narrow Creole-like diphthongs, or even monophthongs, in place of the broad FACE and GOAT diphthongs of traditional Cockney, [ʌɪ] and [ʌʊ], respectively (see Cheshire et. al., 2006 for details).

Cockney is a low-prestige variety but, by dint of being used as a vehicle of literature and comedy, it also has covert prestige. Everyone is familiar with the flower girl Liza Doolittle, Shaw's character in *Pygmalion* (the basis for the award-winning musical *My Fair Lady*) whose speech the phonetician Professor Higgins strives to improve, or Sam Weller in Dicken's *Pickwick Papers*, who pronounced his [v]'s like [w]'s (*wery good*).

People often associate Cockney with Rhyming Slang, prototypically a collection of binomial phrases whose second noun rhymes with the name of the object referred to, e.g. *plates of meat* 'feet' and *trouble and strife* 'wife'. Lists of it have appeared in numerous publications on Cockney, and there is a good recent specialized dictionary (Ayto, 2002). However, most Londoners rarely use it, except for the items that have become widespread in General English and which many people no longer actually recognize as originally being Cockney rhyming slang: *butcher's* (= *butcher's hook* 'look'), *loaf* (= *loaf of bread* 'head'), *china* (= *china plate* 'mate'). Note also the recent trend among some people of producing rhymes based on the names of famous people: *Hank Marvin* (lead guitarist of the Shadows) for *starving*, and *Shania Twain* for *pain (in the backside)* 'nuisance' (referred to as Mockney or Popney).

2. The present study

In this brief study, I compare the speech of two elderly London speakers, one male and one female, aged sixty-seven and seventy-two respectively at the time of recording, and both with secondary-school education. I show that the two speakers represent different styles of London speech, the male being closer to what we could call true Cockney, and the female being representative of what we might term Popular London Speech. I thus corroborate Wells' recognition of the existence of popular London

accents that differ from broad Cockney in being more similar to RP (Wells 1982: 302). In order to do this, I pay attention to four variables closely associated with the pronunciation of Londoners:

1. H-dropping
2. TH-fronting
3. T-glottalling
4. L-vocalization

Cockney speakers would be expected to use these traits all the time; speakers of PLS will use them to a greater or lesser extent.

First of all, I shall provide a summary of what is known about these linguistic features from the existing literature on the speech of London. Then I shall examine a recording that I made of my two participants on separate occasions in a reading task in order to see to what extent the above four traits are present in their speech.

2.1. H-dropping

Whereas in RP there are many instances of synchronic variable [h]-loss in grammatical words in unstressed environments, and historically in the suffix -*ham* (*Buckingham* /bʌkɪŋəm/) and the pronoun *it* < *hit*, this type of elision is extended, at least among older Cockney speakers, to lexical words like *hat* [æʔ], *heavy* [ˈɛvɪi] and *help* [ɛoʔpʰ], so that H-dropping is also common in stressed syllables. As the phenomenon is highly stigmatized, Cockney speakers and Londoners in general will make a conscious effort to pronounce [h] in more careful speech. They are usually aware of where [h] is pronounced in RP and are able to use it correctly, but occasionally cases of hypercorrection like *h-educated* [ˈhɛdjʊʉkʌɪʔɪd̥] and *h-ignorant* [ˈhɪgnərənʔ] arise. However, nowadays these are more often than not facetious pronunciations rather than genuine lapses. At least as far young people in (South-east) London are concerned, H-loss, though still widespread, seems to be stabilizing or has stabilized (Tollfree, 1999: 173).

2.2. TH-fronting

Just as Londoners are conscious of where [h] is expected in pronunciation, they are also cognizant of the [f] - [θ] and [v] - [ð] distinction in RP in minimal pairs such as *fought/fort-thought* and *lithe-live*, and often exploit the opposition themselves; otherwise, we would expect to see many hypercorrections like [θɑɪð] for *five* (Wells, 1982: 328-329). However,

there is often a merger of these labio-dental and dental segments in London, so that *thin* sounds like *fin*, and *breathe* sounds like *breve*. Initial [ð] is usually maintained, except in the speech of young children, where forms such as [və] for *the* may be found.

2.3. T-glottalling

Although in the present study I am focussing particularly on T-glottalling, it needs to be mentioned that all three unvoiced plosives, [p, t, k], tend to be subject to pre-glottalization when following a vowel and not in absolute initial position in RP: *cup* [kʰʌʔpʰ], *mat* [mæʔtʰ], *nick* [nɪʔkʰ]. In Cockney it sometimes happens that these segments are realized as a bare glottal stop (*cup* [kʰʌʔ], *mat* [mæʔ], *nick* [nɪʔ]), even when a vowel follows: *cup of tea* ['kʰaʔ ə 'tʰiː], *mat and carpet* ['mæʔ ən 'kɑːʔɪʔ], *he'll nick it* [io 'nɪʔ ɪʔ]. This is most frequently so in the case of underlying /t/, but with the other unvoiced plosives there tends to be a gesture accompanying the glottalling which identifies them as either bilabial or velar, and which may be heard as a weakly articulated plosive: *paper* ['pʌɪʔbə], *Wilkins* ['wɪoʔgɪ nz]. As can be seen, glottalization takes place in Cockney most commonly when the following syllable is unstressed. Notwithstanding, the glottal stop is occasionally found before stress, as in *tata* [tʰæ'ʔɑː] 'goodbye' and *cartoons* [kʰɑː'ʔʊʉ nz].

In educated British English accents (what Collins & Mees [2003: 245] call NRP, non-regional pronunciation), pre-glottalization and glottal replacement of [t] very commonly affect a group of high-frequency words, namely: *it, bit, get, let, at, that, got, lot, not* (and contracted forms: *don't, can't, aren't, isn't,* etc.), *what, put, but, might, right, quite, out, about* (Collins & Mees, 2003: 82). However, in Cockney, glottalization is the norm and tends to be used across the board, except in highly self-conscious speech styles or careful reading.

2.4. L-vocalization

While the loss of final [r] in both Cockney and RP is a complete, irreversible process which always operates unless the next syllable begins with a vowel, in which case a linking [r] is used (Cockney *far* [fɑː], *how far is it?* [æʊ 'fɑːr ɪz ɪʔ]), loss of the other liquid, [l], in final position is still resisted in many educated accents and registers of English: *tall* /tɔːl/ is

preferred to /tɔː/, for example. It is however not an either/or phenomenon (the difference between a vocoid segment and a very dark [l] may be hard to perceive) and, for this reason, many people who would claim to pronounce their post-vocalic [l]s do not in fact do so, except in highly self-conscious styles. Londoners, on the whole, tend to produce vocoid articulations for their post-vocalic [l]s.

The phenomenon is not unknown in other languages, like Polish, where it can occur in initial position (witness the case of the city of *Łódź* /wudʒ/), Brazilian Portuguese (note the pronunciation *Brazil* /bra'ziu/), and Rumanian, whose northern dialects (e.g. Maramureş) tend to vocalize or drop [ɫ] (ALBU > *aub* 'white', *asculta* > *ascuta* 'listen'; See Rosetti 1978: 534, 602). In English, L-vocalization is a consequence of the velarization or "darkening" of [l]. In Cockney, when pronounced after vowels, [l] is very dark (symbol [ɫ]) and, if it becomes vocoid, as it usually does, as in *small* [smoː] and *bowl* [bɒʊ], the resulting back vowel is in the region of [o], [ʊ] or unrounded [ɤ].

L-vocalization means that Londoner's who use it have an additional phoneme among their diphthongs: *bowl* /bɒʊ / v. bow /bəʊ /, soul [sɒʊ] v. so/sew/sow [sʌʊ].

Although the environment in which [l]-vocalization has been traditionally attested is word/syllable-final pre-consonantal or pre-pausal, Tollfree (1999: 174) has found instances in word-final intervocalic contexts among the younger generation in South East London (1999: 174). This means that from now on we are probably going to find increasing vocalization in phrases like *the Millwall area* [ðə mɪo'woːʷ ɛəriə], *Muswell Hill* ['mazwɛoʷ ɪo] and *He took a bowl over his mate's* 'He went to his friend's house' [ɹi 'tʰʊʔk ə bɒʊʷ ʌʊvər ɪz mʌɪʔs] without recovery of the underlying lateral segment.

3. The recordings

For the purpose of this study, the participants were asked to read the passage "The North Wind and the Sun", whose orthographic version and approximate RP transcription are provided below (3.1 and 3.2). The recordings, made on a mini-disc recorder, were converted to wave files using Goldwave and transcriptions were produced. When it was necessary to check features such as aspiration, voice and glottalization, the relevant segments were examined in the programme PRAAT. To keep the

transcriptions reasonably consistent, cases where laryngealization seemed to be present rather than complete glottal closure were all treated as cases of glottalization and the symbol for the glottal stop was used.

Nasalization of vowels is not indicated in the transcriptions. It is normal for vowels to be nasalized to a greater or lesser extent when followed by a nasal consonant, and this is particularly noticeable in Cockney and PLS. However, as it is a feature that is entirely predictable, it was considered unnnecessary to record it in the phonetic notation.

3.1. *The North Wind and the Sun*. Orthographic version

The North Wind and the Sun were disputing which was the stronger, when a traveller came along wrapped in a warm cloak. They agreed that the one who first succeeded in making the traveller take his cloak off should be considered stronger than the other. Then the North Wind blew as hard as he could, but the more he blew the more closely did the traveller fold his cloak around him; and at last the North Wind gave up the attempt. Then the Sun shone out warmly, and immediately the traveller took off his cloak. And so the North Wind was obliged to confess that the Sun was the stronger of the two.

3.2. *The North Wind and the Sun*. RP transcription. Phonemic (based on Roach 2004: 244)

ðə ˈnɔ:θ ˈwɪnd ən ðə ˈsʌn | wə dɪˈspju:tɪŋ ˈwɪtʃ wəz ðə ˈstrɒŋgə | wɛn ə ˈtrævlə keɪm əlɒŋ ˈræpt ɪn ə ˈwɔ:m ˈkləʊk ‖ ðeɪ əˈgri:d | ðət ðə ˈwʌn hu ˈfɜ:st sək'si:dɪd ɪn ˈmeɪkɪŋ ðə ˈtrævlə teɪk ɪz ˈkləʊk ɒf | ʃʊd bi kənˈsɪdəd ˈstrɒŋgə ðən ði ˈʌðə ‖ ˈðɛn ðə ˈnɔ:θ ˈwɪnd ˈblu: əz ˈhɑ:d əz i ˈkʊd | bət ðə ˈmɔ: hi ˈblu: | ðə ˈmɔ: ˈkləʊsli dɪd ðə ˈtrævlə ˈfəʊld hɪz ˈkləʊk əˈraʊnd hɪm | ənd ət ˈlɑ:st | ðə ˈnɔ:θ ˈwɪnd geɪv ʌp ði əˈtɛmpt ‖ ˈðɛn ðə ˈsʌn | ˈʃɒn aʊt ˈwɔ:mli | ənd ɪˈmi:diətli ðə trævlə ˈtʊk ɒf ɪz kləʊk ‖ ən ˈsəʊ ðə ˈnɔ:θ ˈwɪnd wəz əˈblaɪdʒd tə kənˈfɛs | ðət ðə ˈsʌn wəz ðə ˈstrɒŋgər əv ðə tu:

3.3. *The North Wind and the Sun*. TC, male aged 67, from Paddington, W2

ðə 'noʊf 'wɪnd əṇ ðə 'san | wə dɪ'spjʉːʔɪn 'wɪtʃ wəz̥ ðə 'ʃtrɒŋgə | wɛn ə 't ͡sævələ kʰɛɪm əlɒŋ 'ræp t ͡s ɪn ə 'woːm 'klʌʊkʰ || ðʌɪ ə'g̊ɾɪi ðə̃ʔ ðə 'wʌn ɦu 'fɜːs səksɪɪð̥ɪd m̩ mʌɪkɪn ðə trævə tʰeɪk ɪz 'klʌʊk ɒf | 'ʃʊb̥ bɪi kʰṇ'sɪdə 'ʃtrɒŋgə ðəṇ ðɪi 'avə || 'ðɛṇ ṇə 'noʊθ̥ 'wɪnd 'blʊʉ əz 'ɑːd̥ əz ɪʔ 'kʊd̥ʰ | b̥əʔ ðə 'mɔə ɪi 'b̥l̥ʊʉ | ðə 'mɔə 'klʌʊsl̩i dɪd ðə 'trævələ 'fɒʊd ɪz̥ 'klʌʊkʰ ə'ræʊnd ɪm | æn əʔ 'lɑːs | ðə 'noʊf 'wɪnd ɡeɪv 'ʌp ðɪi ə'tʰɛmʔtʰ || 'ðɛṇ ðə 'san 'ʃɒn æəʔ 'woːmli æn ɪ'mɪɪdɪiəʔlɪi ðə 'trævə 'tʰʊkʰ ɒf ɪz̥ 'klʌʊkʰ || ən 'sʌʊ ðə 'noːθ wɪnd wəz ə'blɑɪʒ tʰu kʰṇ'fɛːs | dæʔ θə 'san | wəz̥ ðə 'ʃtrɒŋgər əv̥ ðə tʰəʉ

3.4. *The North Wind and the Sun*. PT, female aged 72, from Abbey Wood, SE2

ðə 'noʊθ 'wɪnd æṇ ðə 'san | wɜː dɪ'spjʊʉtʰɪn 'wɪtʃ wəz̥ zə 'ṣtrɒŋgə | wɛn ə 't ͡sṛævələ kʰʌɪm əlɒŋ 'ræʔtʰ ɪn ə 'woʊ̥ŋ 'klʌʊkʰ || ðʌɪ ə'g̊ɾɪid̥ | ðəʔ ðə 'wʌn ɦu 'fɜːs sək'sɪɪdɪd̥ ɪn 'mʌɪkʰɪn ṇə 'trævələ | tʰʌɪk hɪz 'klʌʊkʰ ɒf | ʃʊd 'b̥əi kṇ'sɪdəd 'strɒŋgə ðəṇ ðɪi 'aðə || 'ðɛṇ ṇə 'noʊθ̥ 'wɪn 'b̥ṛʊʉ əz 'hɑːd əz̥ hɪi 'kʰʊd̥ | b̥əʔ ðə 'mɔə ɦɪi 'b̥lʊʉ ðə 'mɔə 'klʌʊsl̩i d̥ɪd ðə 'trævələ | 'fɒʊd hɪz̥ 'klʌʊʔk ə'ræʊnd ɦɪm | ənd əʔ 'lɑːst ə 'noʊθ wɪnd̥ɧ g̊ʌɪv ʌʔ ðɪi ə'tʰɛmt || 'ðɛṇ ðə sʌn 'ʃɒn æəʔ 'woːmli | ænd ə'mɪɪdɪiəʔlɪi | ðə trævələ 'tʰʊkʰ ɒf hɪz̥ klʌʊk || ən 'sʌʊ ðə 'noʊθ̥ 'wɪnd wəz ə'blɑɪʒ tʰə kʰṇ'fɛs | ðəʔ ðə 'san wəz ðə 'sːtrɒŋgə ɒv ðə 'tʰʊʉ

4. Comment on the recordings

The number of instances in the readings of the linguistic features under scrutiny can be seen in the following table:

	H-dropping	TH-fronting excluding initial [ð]	T-glottalling	L-vocalization
Male speaker	6/7	3/5	7/7	1/1
Female speaker	0/8	0/5	5/6	1/1

H-dropping is absent from the female speaker's reading, not even occurring with the grammatical words *he* and *his*, which would often have

an aitch-less form in RP connected speech. In the male speaker's reading, H-dropping is almost 100% (6/7 – note one instance of *it* instead of *he*).

TH-fronting is totally absent from the female speaker's reading. In the male speaker, TH-fronting occurs, except when [ð] is initial, as in the definite article, etc.

In the female reader, T-glottalling is only used pre-consonantally, as in RP. She also glottalizes the [p] of *up,* but, once again, in preconsonantal position. In the male reader, T-glottalling is 100% (also found in the form *it*, which he uses on one occasion instead of *he*).

Both speakers vocalize the [l] of *fold*. Presumably, if there had been more instances of this consonant in preconsonantal or final prepausal position, then they would have vocalized these, too, as is the norm in London.

5. Conclusion

It would appear from the two readings that we are dealing with two slightly different but related varieties of London speech: the speech of the male speaker is closer to what we would label as true Cockney, which lies at the basilectal end of the London accent continuum, while that of the female speaker approximates more to John Wells' concept of "popular London" Speech, which he describes as being "very slightly closer to RP than the broadest Cockney" (Wells, 1982: 302). It would therefore appear feasible to propose, as Wells does, a classification that makes a distinction between forms of London speech that resemble one variety or the other, apart from recognizing a more educated variety closer to RP than either of these, and the more recent appearance of a vernacular more obviously influenced by substantial immigration, with levelling of the diphthongs in the FACE and GOAT sets of words: Multi-Cultural London English.

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