

Analysing the language of television

The case of Media Cockney

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Paper overview

This paper investigates the linguistic, and specifically, phonetic nature of popular television shows set in London (media-Cockney), namely *Only Fools and Horses*, *The Bill*, and *EastEnders*. All three shows topped viewing ratings for their genre at the time of our data collection (spring 2003), and were also very popular with our informants.

Note that the results for GOOSE/FOOT for Kat and Alfie are based on very small numbers of tokens. Subsequent measurements of these vowels from another episode confirm our findings, and will be incorporated into the written version of the paper.

JSS/CT 31/03/05

Analysing the language of television

The case of Media Cockney

- Why analyse accents portrayed on television?
- Previous research on represented accents
- ‘media-Cockney’ – the accent of television shows set in London
- Our sample: police drama; comedy; soap
- Methods
- Results
- Concluding remarks

Background: TV and accent change

- traditional view: sociolinguists deny effect of watching popular television on accent change, insist on face to face interaction as mechanism
(e.g. Milroy and Milroy 1985)

BUT

- speculations about a possible role for television
(e.g. Bayard 1990 on New Zealand English)

AND

- recent findings in British English accents provoke discussion of the topic
(e.g. Williams and Kerswill 1999)

The Glasgow problem

- least geographically mobile, working-class adolescents in Glasgow, Scotland
- using accent features typical of South East/London English, e.g. [f] for /th/ in e.g. *think* [v] for /dh/ in e.g. *brother*
- ??



Extract from:
METRO SCOTLAND
Edinburgh
(circ:330, 231)



28 JUN 2000

Cockneys are killing off the Scots accent

6455
SOAP operas like EastEnders are the most likely culprits for the growing spread of Estuary English among Glaswegian teenagers, academics claimed yesterday.

Youngsters in the city are developing a "southern drawl" at the expense of distinctive Scottish sounds such as the 'ch' in 'loch', according to the study by Glasgow University.

Researchers found pronunciations such as 'toof' for 'tooth' are becoming more common, while traditional Glasgow variations such as 'mulk' for 'milk' are in decline. They believe the influence of TV is to blame as many of the youngsters surveyed had little direct contact English people.

Glaswegians aged 13-14 were asked to read lists of words and talk in pairs before comparing the results with people aged 40-60. Dr Jane Stuart-Smith, of the Department of English Language, said: "The finger of suspicion points to the media and programmes like EastEnders, which are rich in Cockney accents. 'Whatever the cause, it is certain that Glasgow's accent is changing."

- broadcast media blame ...
- the media
- and in particular, popular television dramas set in London (Cockney dialect)

The Glasgow 'media' project

- Three-year funded project to investigate the potential effects of television on accent change in adolescents (Economic and Social Research Council: R0002357957)
- If we want to investigate television as a factor in language change (for us: TV programmes set in London on Glaswegian dialect), we need to know what the viewer is exposed to
- What are the accent features of popular television shows?

Previous work on accents in the media

Very little work exists ...

- News broadcasters (English: RP), Hannisdal (2003)
- Pop songs in UK, Trudgill (1983)
- TV adverts in New Zealand, Bell (1992)
- Children's television, *Teletubbies*,
Velleman and Schmidt (1999)
- Soap character accent, UK,
Timmins and Stuart-Smith (2000)
- Türkendeutsch, Androutsopoulos (2001)

Research Aims

- To provide first empirical evidence for accent features in three popular television dramas set in London (media-Cockney)
- To consider the similarities and differences in represented media-Cockney accents in these programmes
- To discuss how media-Cockney relates to descriptions of real accents of London and South East English

Media-Cockney – London accents in television shows

- Three popular television shows set in London
 - police drama: *The Bill*
 - comedy: *Only Fools and Horses*
 - soap: *EastEnders*
- Samples collected during early Spring 2003 (during our speech data collection)
- All three shows topped audience ratings for their type during this period



The police drama: *The Bill*

- contemporary police drama, started 1983
- set in 'Sun Hill', in London
- very popular: 8.2 million/week
- screening: 2 episodes/week

- sample: one hour-long episode
- selected characters:
 - those 'from London'



The comedy: *Only Fools and Horses*

- traditional Cockney comedy drama, 1981-96; 2001-3
- set in Peckham, East London
- most popular comedy: 7.3 million/week
- screening: occasional
(64 episodes plus feature films)

- sample: full-length feature film
- selected characters:
 - main characters

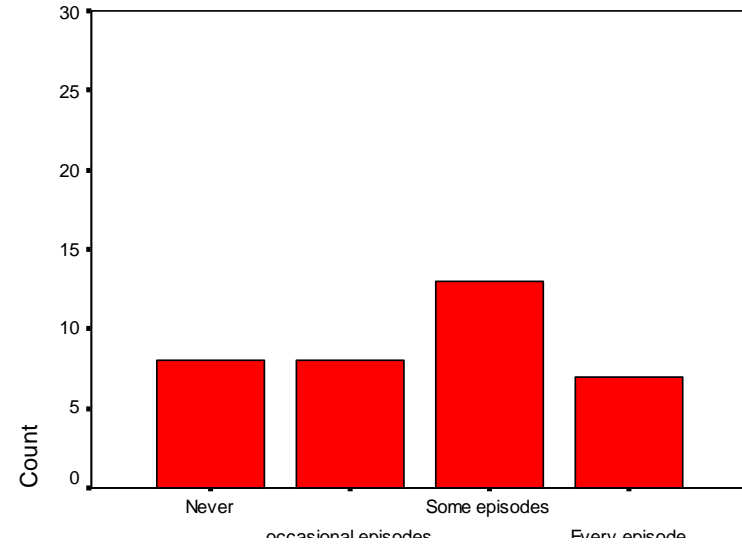
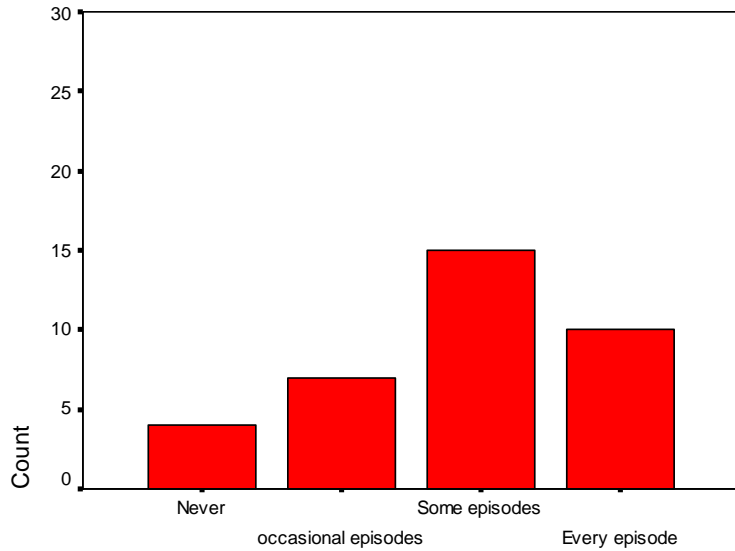


The soap: *EastEnders*

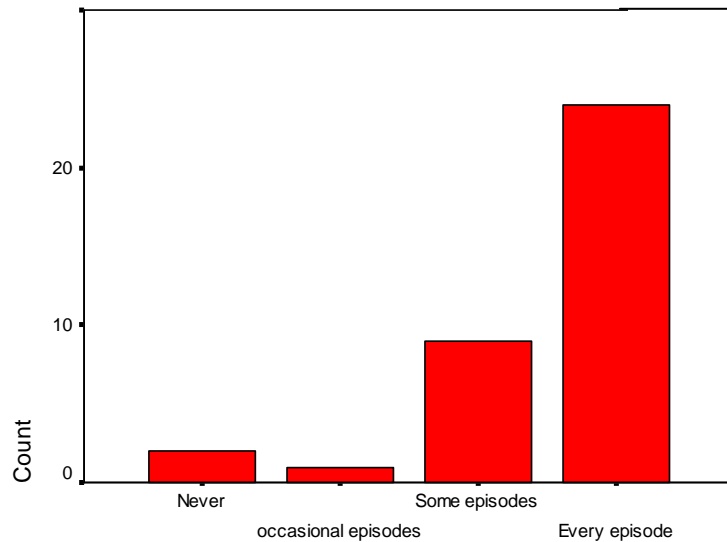
- contemporary soap drama, started 1985
- set in 'Walford' in East End of London
- exceptionally popular: 18 million/week
- screening: 4 episodes/week

- sample: 5 episodes
- selected characters
 - our informants
 - popular story lines

Our informants' viewing of London TV dramas



The Bill



Only Fools and Horses

EastEnders

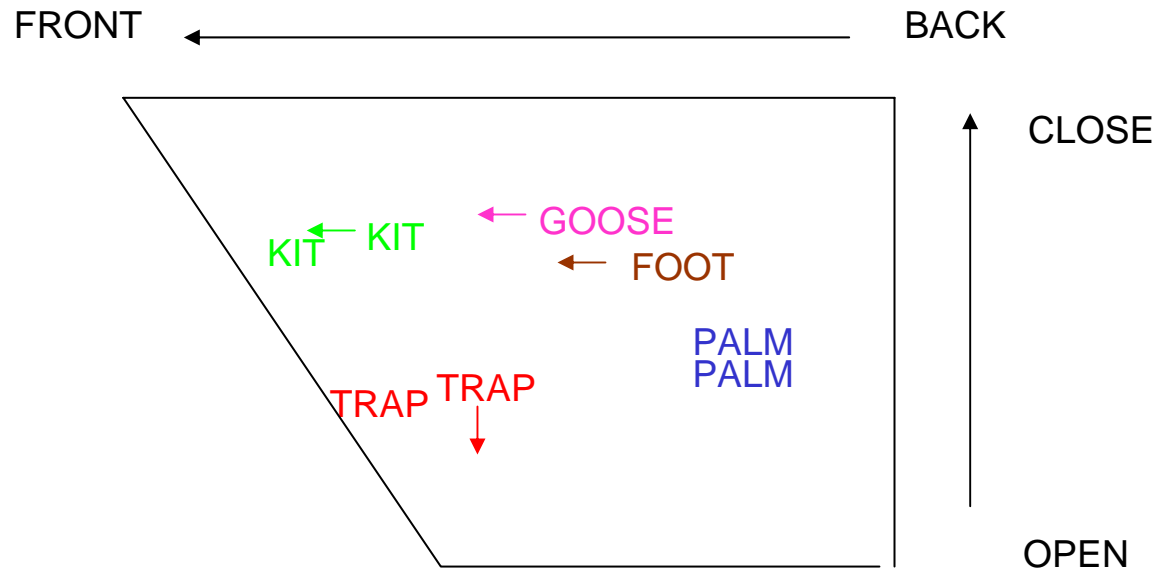
London accents in reality

Consonants

- TH-Fronting: use of [f] for /th/ in e.g. *think, tooth*
- DH-Fronting: use of [v] for /dh/ in e.g. *brother, with*
- L-Vocalization: use of vowel for /l/ in e.g. *milk, tell, people*

- typical of Cockney (Wells 1982)
- noted for 'popular London' (Wells 1982:302)
- found in South East London English (Tollfree 1999)

London accents in reality



- Very little recent information on Cockney (Wells 1982; Labov 1994)
- Recent analysis of South East English (Torgesen and Kerswill 2004)

Analysis - methods

- Digitized into *Multispeech*: sampling rate 44,000Hz,
16 bit
- Consonants: auditory transcription
 - (th) – [th], [f], [0]
 - (dh) – [dh], [f], [0]
 - (l) – [l], [V], [l/V]
- Vowels: instrumental acoustic analysis
 - formant plots show height/backness of vowels
 - Weber's fractions confirm audible differences

Police drama: *The Bill* - Characters



DC Danny Glaze
(1993 – 2003)



DC Mickey Webb
(2000 – 2003)



Inspector Gina Gold
(2002 -)



PC Kerry Young
(2002 – 2004)



PC Reg Hollis
(1984 -)



Sgt Matthew Boyden
(1991 – 2003)

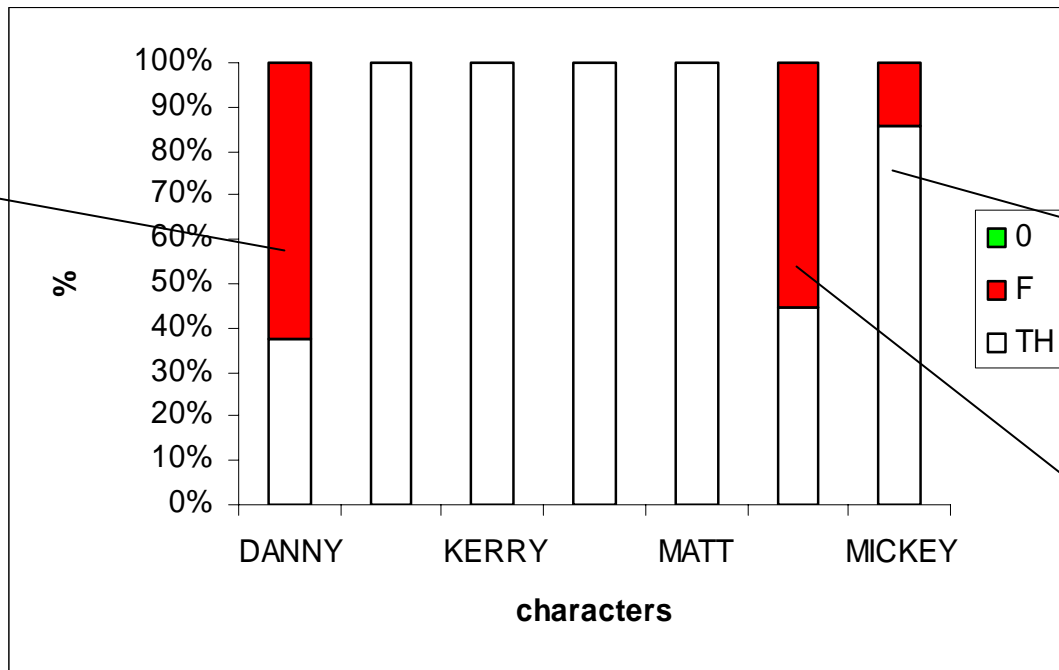


PC Nick Klein
(1999 – 2004)

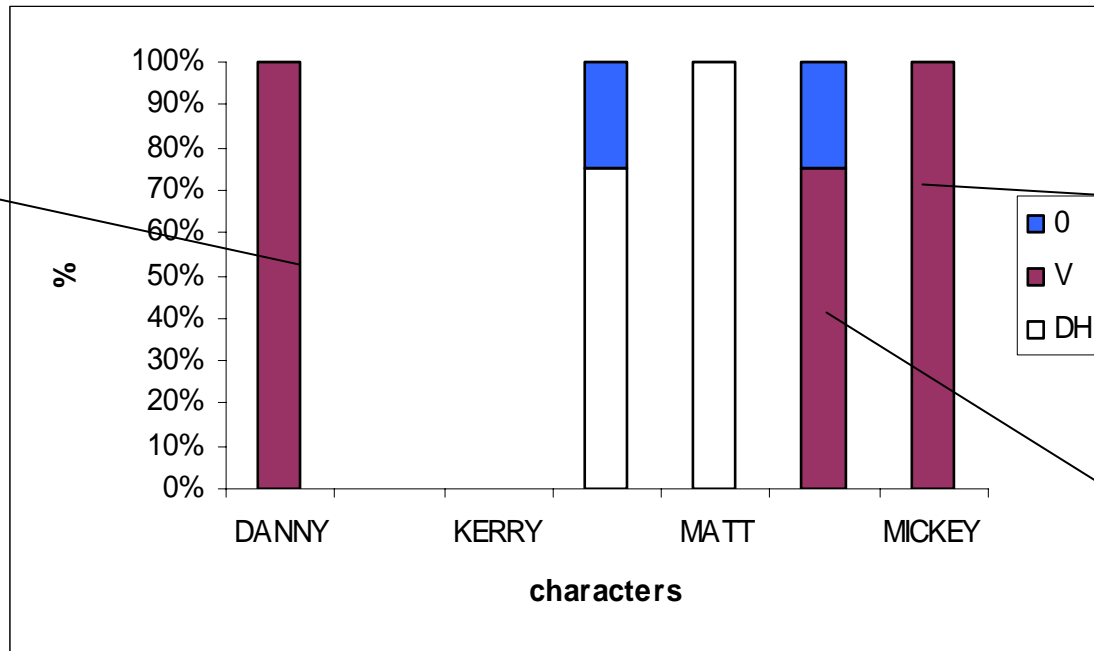


PC Luke Ashton
(1997 – 2003)

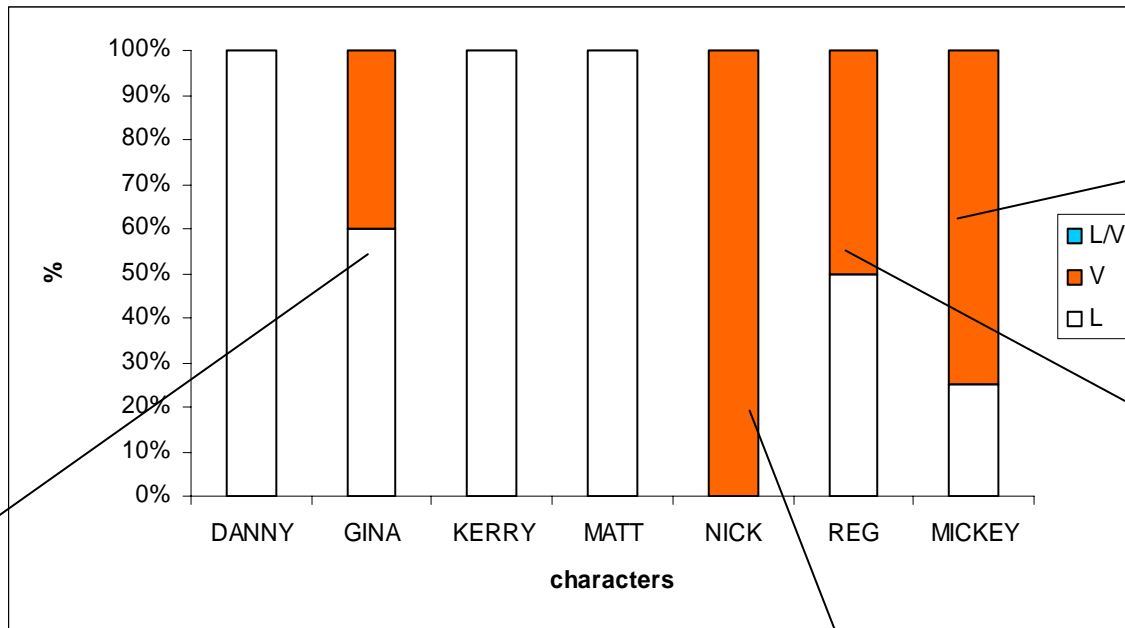
The Bill – TH-Fronting



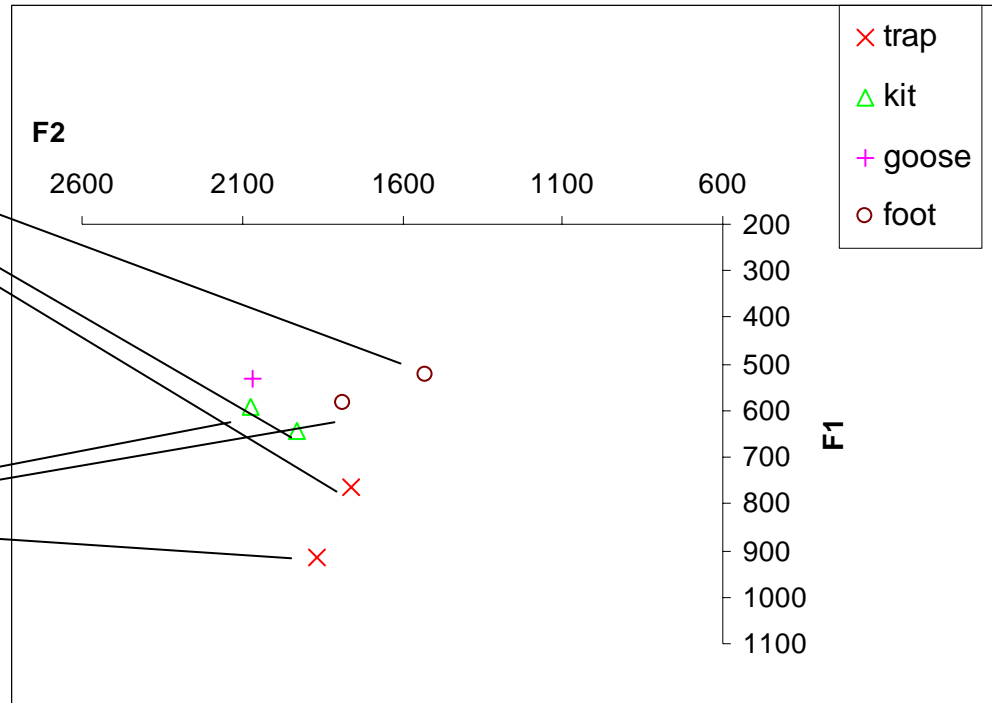
The Bill – DH-Fronting



The Bill – L-Vocalisation

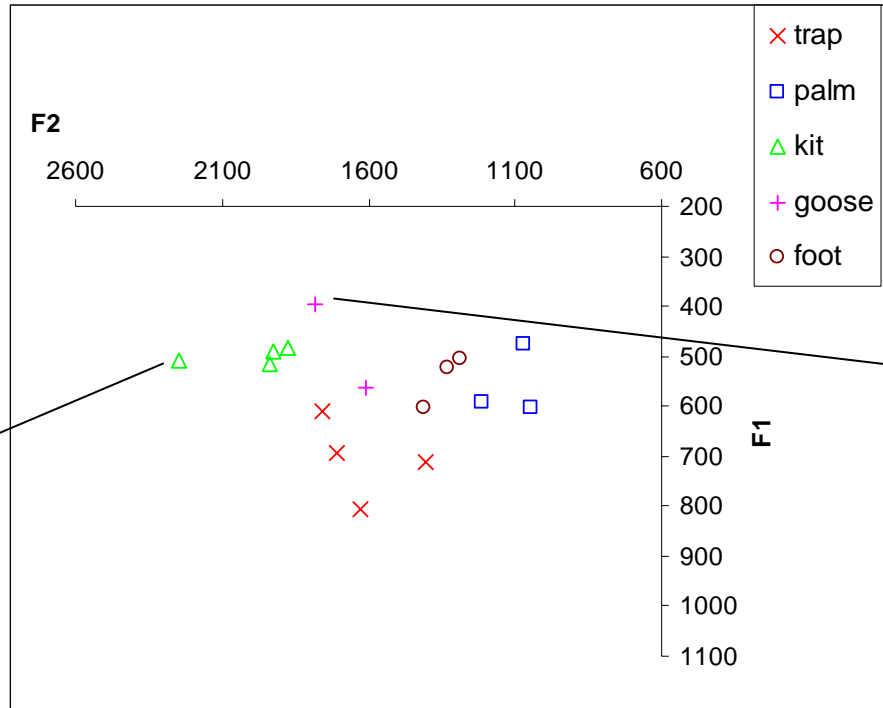


The Bill – Vowels - female



'she hasn't abandoned'

The Bill – Vowels - male



'you too'

Police drama: *The Bill*: summary

- Consonants:
 - expected features appear, but typically in male speakers
- Vowels:
 - age difference in female characters, with younger speaker more like South East England (all vowels)
 - male characters show some features typical of South East England (KIT, GOOSE)
- i.e. perhaps as expected for location of programme

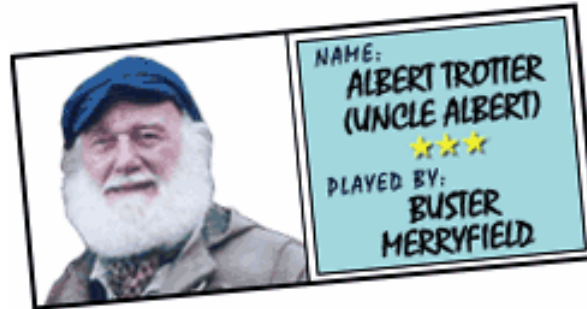
Comedy - *Only Fools and Horses* - characters



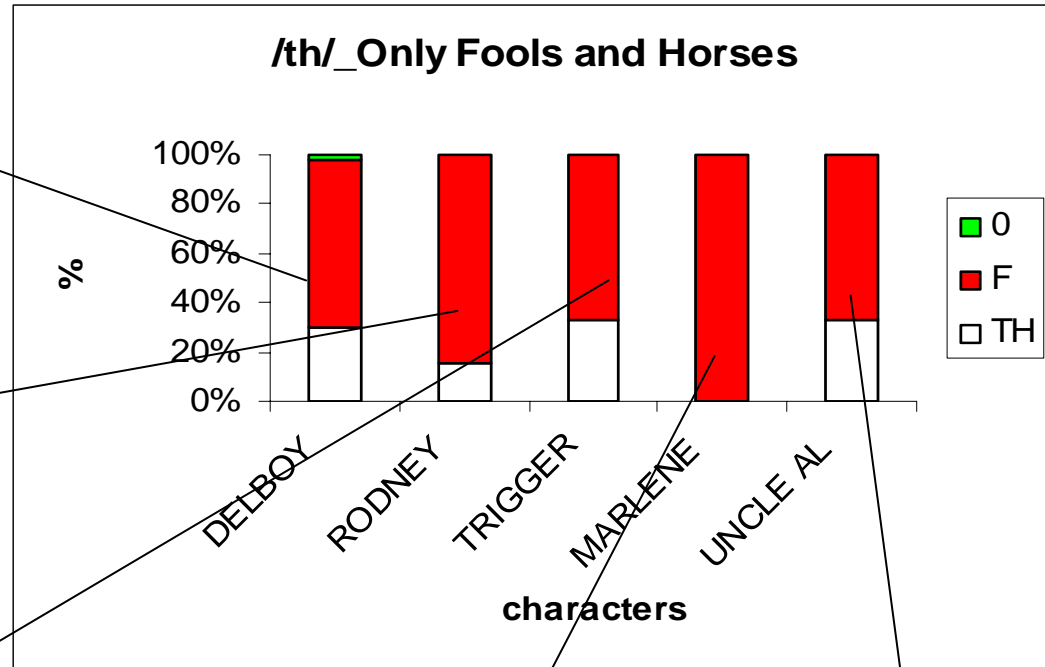
Head of the Trotter family, Elder brother to Rodney.



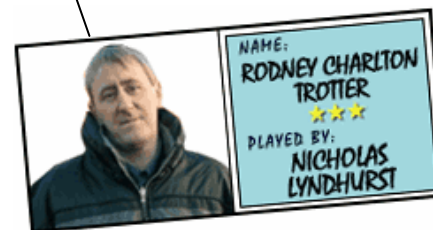
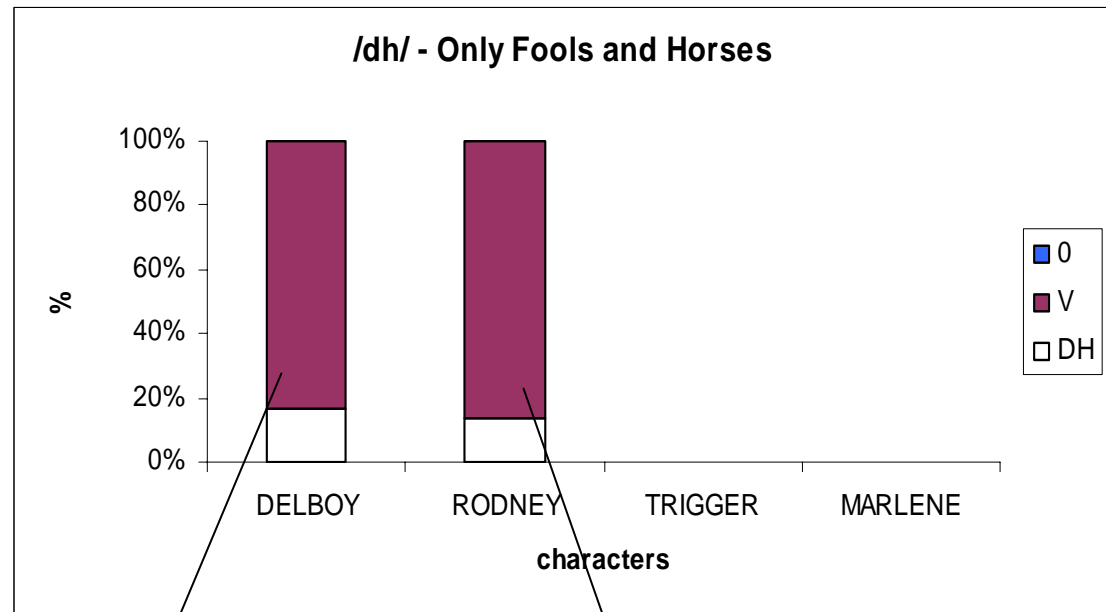
Younger brother to Del Boy, likely to get drawn into terrible schemes.



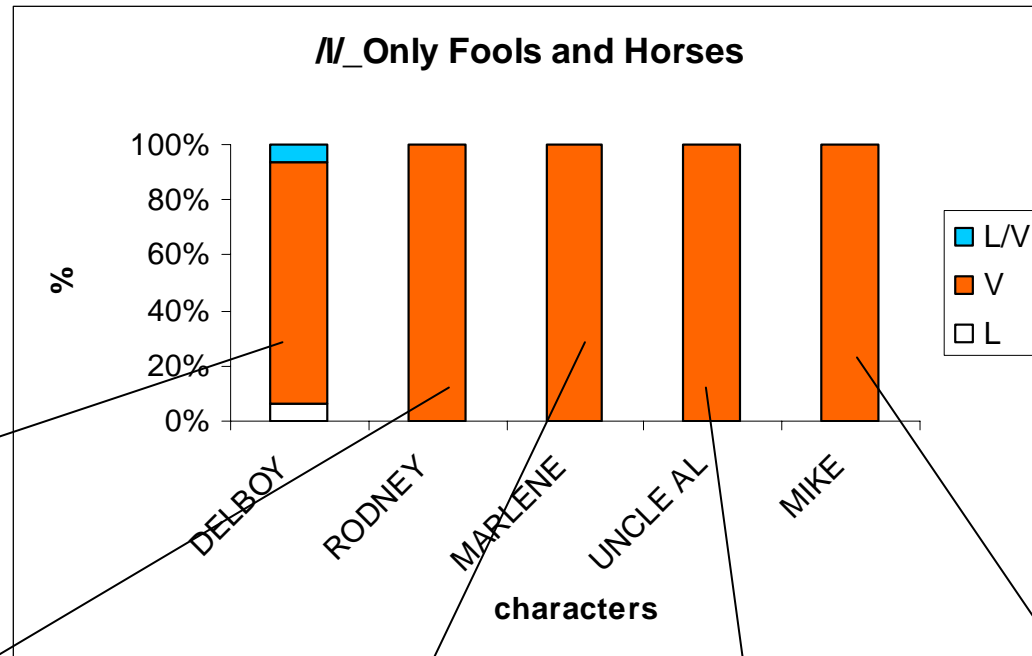
Only Fools and Horses – TH-fronting



Only Fools and Horses – DH-Fronting



Only Fools and Horses – L-Vocalisation



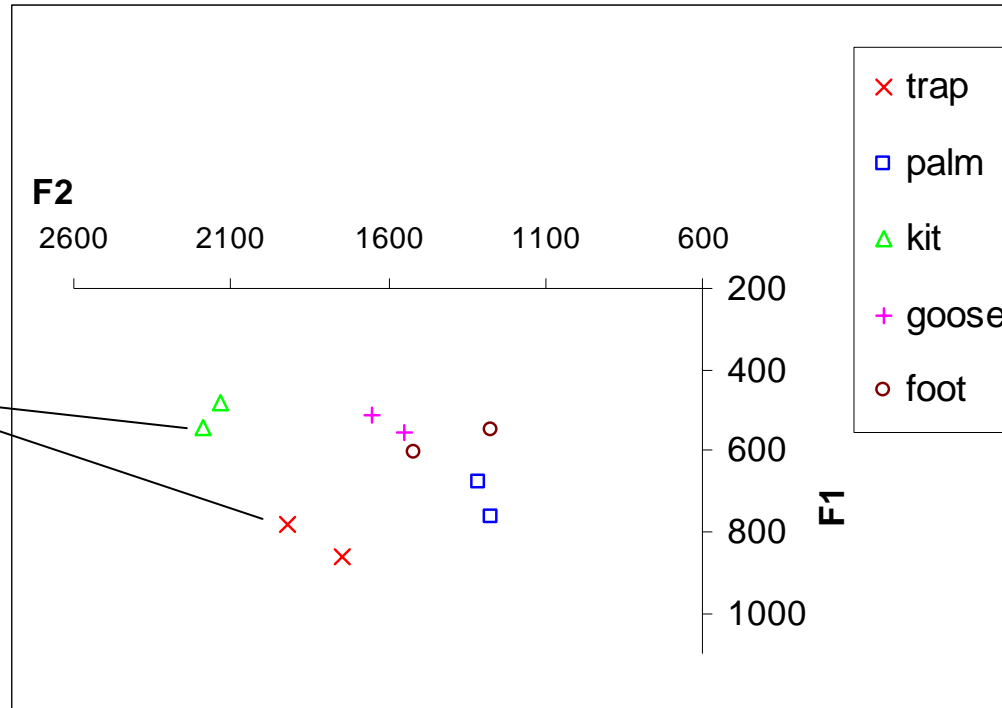
Only Fools and Horses – Vowels



'this is'



'jacket'



Comedy: *Only Fools and Horses*: summary

- Consonants:
 - expected features are very common
- Vowels:
 - KIT very front
 - Del Boy shows more extreme vowels
- i.e. stereotypical features of traditional Cockney?

Soap - *EastEnders* - characters



Alfie Moon:
21.11.2002. Landlord
of Queen Vic pub



Kat Slater: 11.09.2000
Works in the Queen Vic
pub



Paul Trueman:
23.04.2001 – Family run
the Bed and Breakfast



Sharon Watts:
19.02.1985 – runs
Angie's Den nightclub



Spencer Moon:
29.11.2002 Alfie's little
brother, works in pub



Zoe Slater: 11.09.2000
daughter of Kat



Pat Butcher:
12.06.1986 –
Bookmaker staff



Ian Beale: 19.02.1985
Local business man.

Soap - *EastEnders* - characters



Peggy Mitchell:
30.04.1991 Mum to
Phil, Grant and Sam.



Phil Mitchell:
20.01.1990. Local
Hardman. Owns
Snooker Hall, Garage.



Billy Mitchell: 02.08.1989
Phil's second cousin. Works
in Video shop



Little Mo:
11.09.2000 Married
to Billy Mitchell,
sister of Kat



Sam Mitchell:
29.01.2002 Phil's
little sister, once
married to Ricky.



Ricky Butcher:
12.05.1985
Mechanic, working
for Phil Mitchell.



Natalie Evans:
18.01.1994 Married
though having affair
with Ricky

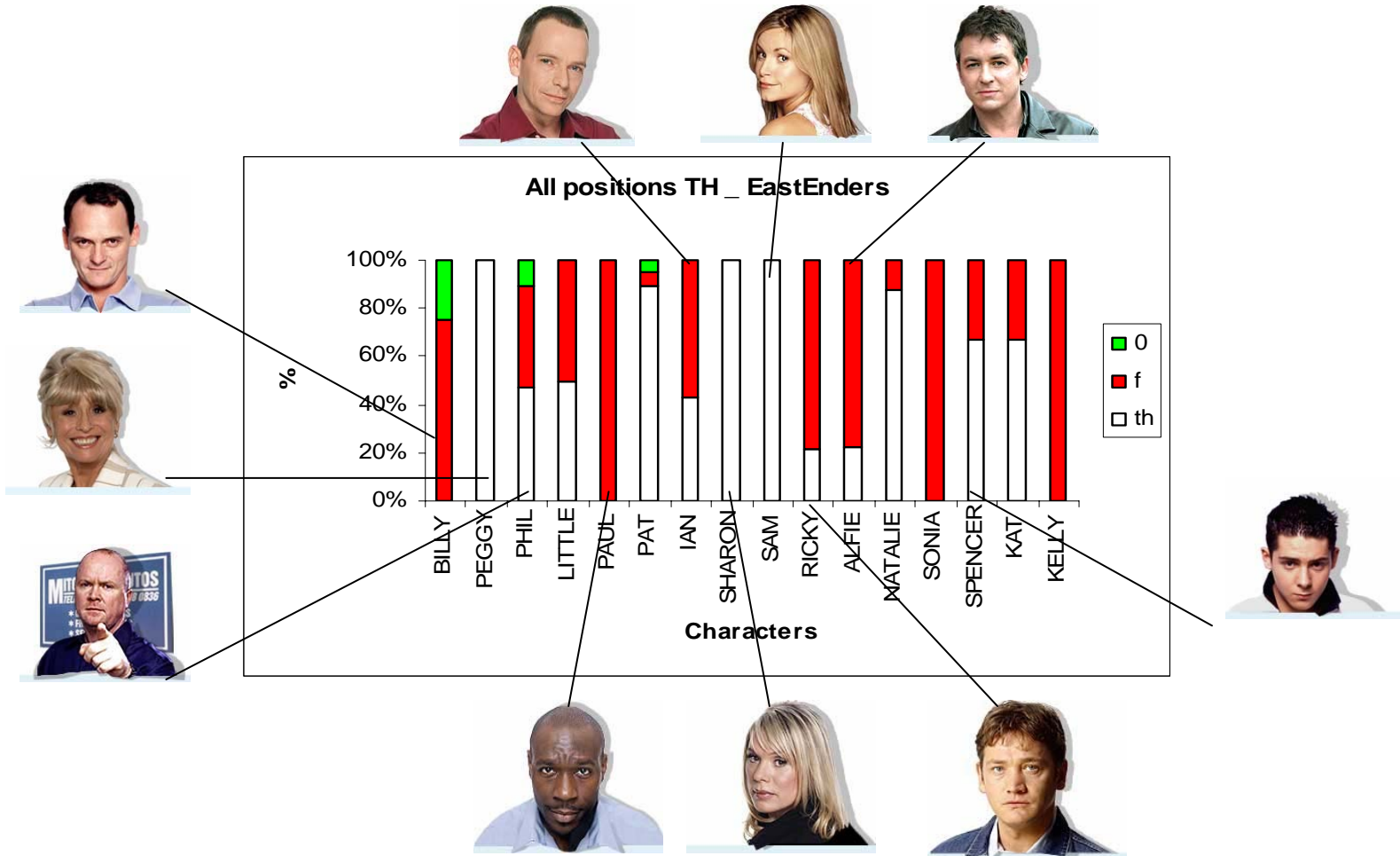
Who is your favourite TV character?



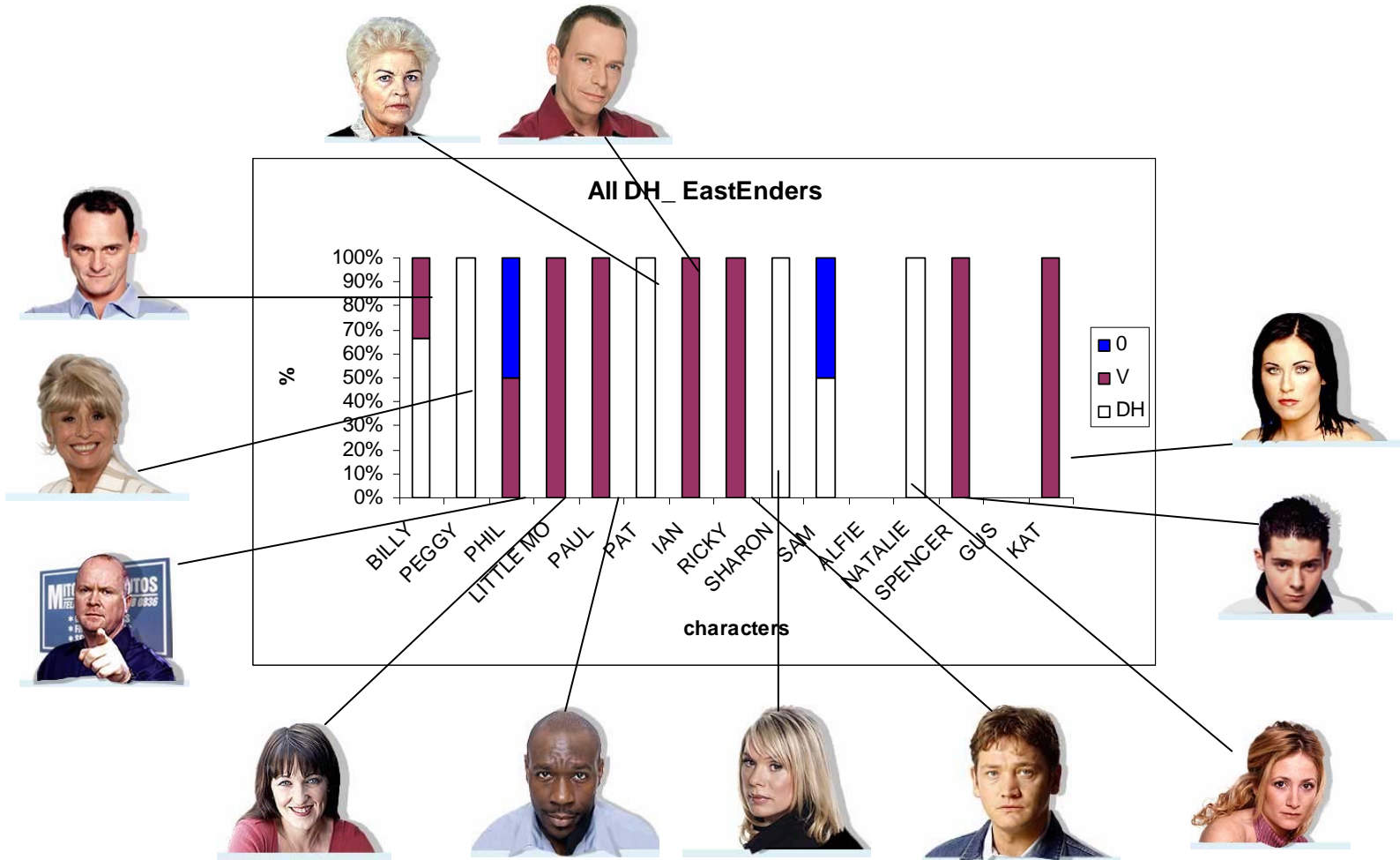
Kat	10
Alfie	8
Phil	3
Spencer	2
Paul	1
Peggy	1
Little Mo	1
Zoe	1



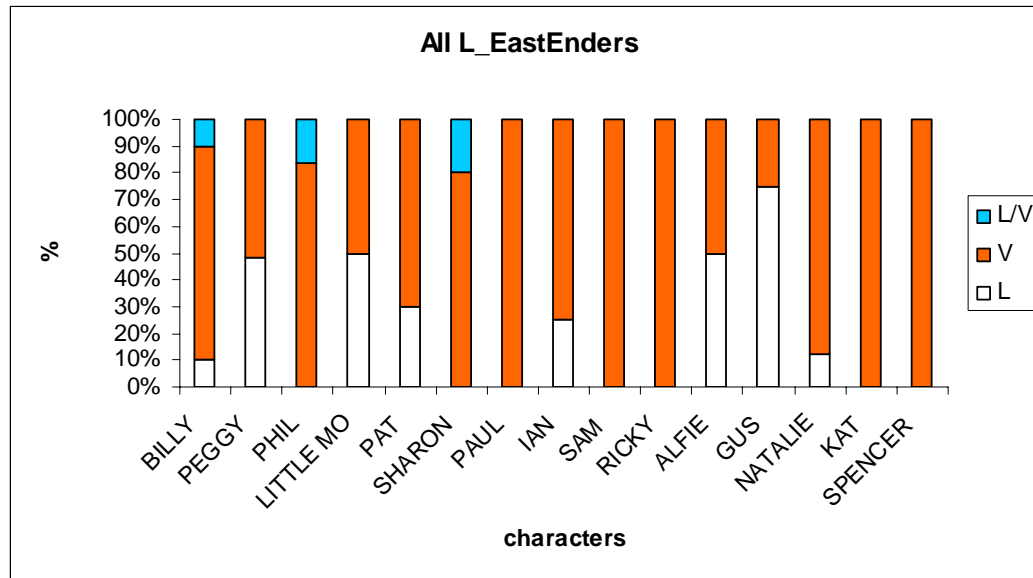
EastEnders – TH-Fronting



EastEnders – DH-Fronting



EastEnders – L-Vocalisation



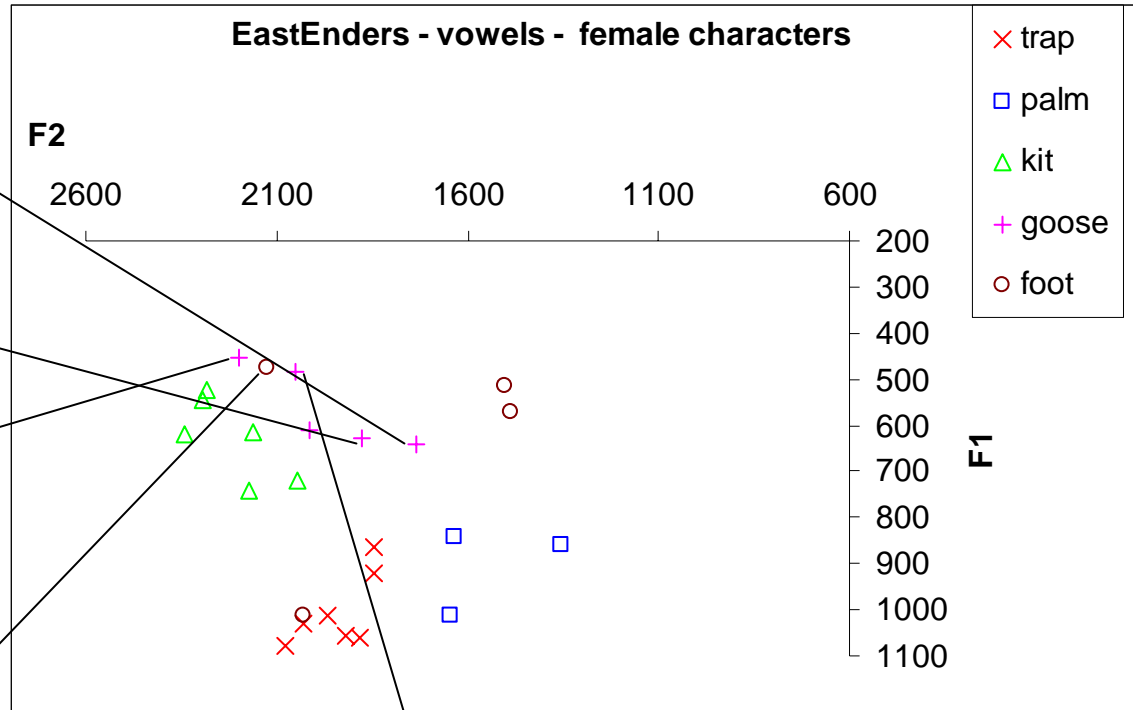
EastEnders – Vowels - female



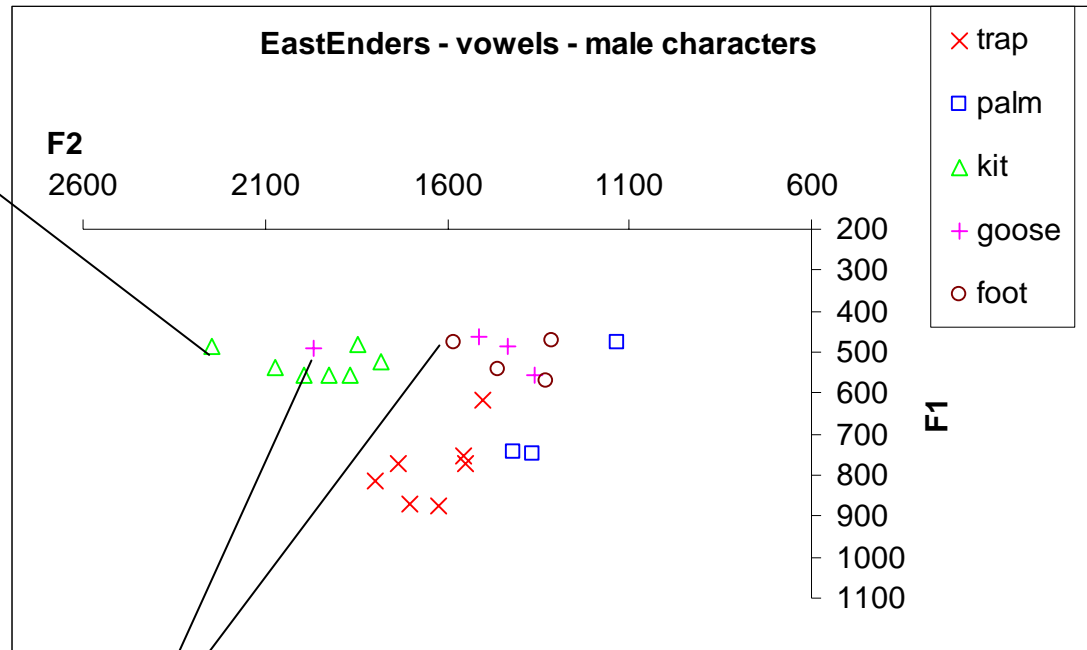
'true'



'do it for me'



EastEnders – Vowels - male



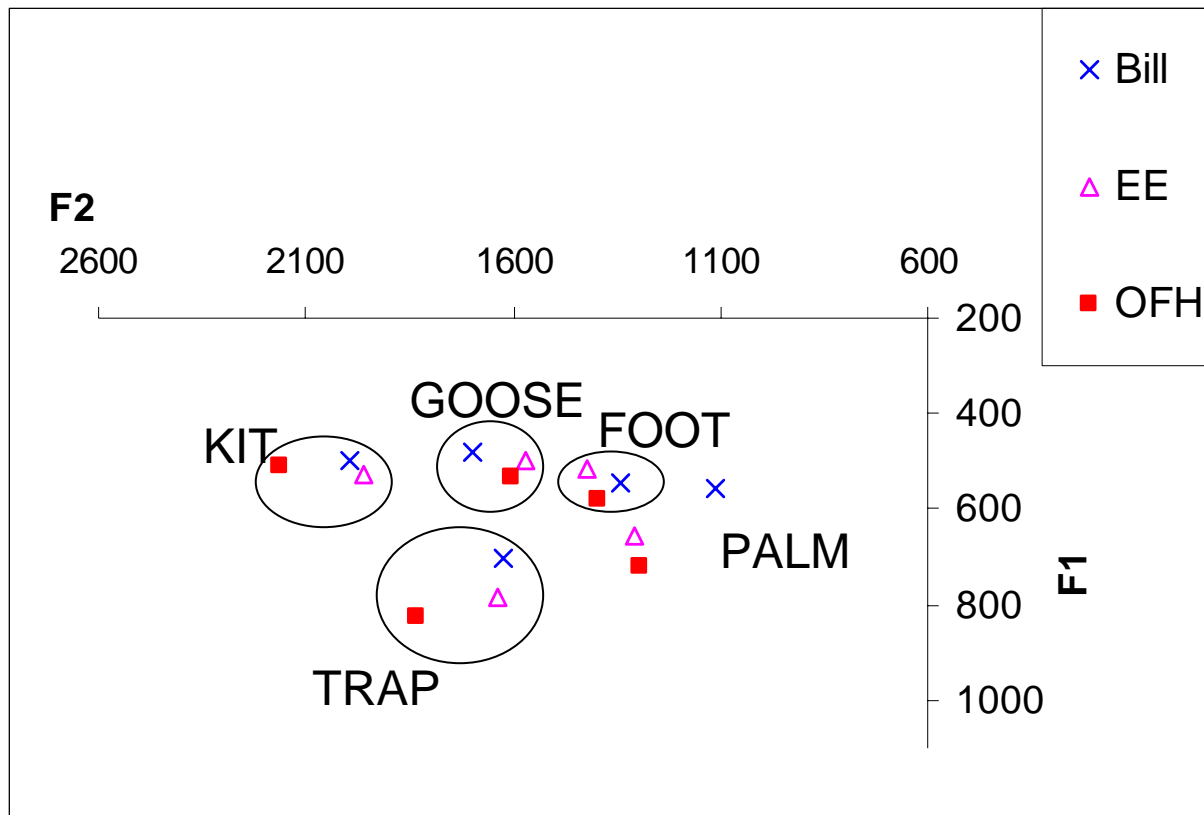
'can do alright'



Soap: *EastEnders*: summary

- Consonants:
 - expected features appear, but more so in male speakers (like *The Bill*)
- Vowels:
 - age difference in female characters, with younger speakers more like South East England (like *The Bill*)
 - male characters show some features typical of South East England (GOOSE, FOOT) (like *The Bill*)
- The two most popular characters also have frontest GOOSE/FOOT
- i.e. features more typical of South East England than Cockney

Media-Cockney – three versions (male speakers)



- Comedy more like (stylized) Cockney than contemporary dramas

What can we say about media-Cockney?

Across accent features we find that

- comedy is more like traditional Cockney (stylized)
- contemporary drama is more like South East English, even the soap supposedly set in the East End of London
- The two most popular characters of the soap show the most extreme instances of vowel changes noted in South East English

GOOSE/FOOT in popular characters

cf Tagliamonte and Roberts (2004)

- Intensifiers e.g. *really, totally, so* in *Friends*
- pattern similar to contemporary spoken English
- frequency of *so* corresponds with popularity of show

‘media language actually does mirror what is going on in language’ ... ‘this media data appear to pave the way; it is more innovative than the general population’

and finally ...

- just how 'real' should these accents be anyway?
- 'The degree to which soaps are considered realistic ... will also depend in no small measure on what audiences themselves bring to soaps.'

Kilborn (1991: 88)

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websites for the programmes

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