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.

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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

• ??
• 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**
  - Never
  - Some episodes
  - Occasional episodes
  - Every episode
  - Count

- **EastEnders**
  - Never
  - Some episodes
  - Occasional episodes
  - Every episode
  - Count

- **Only Fools and Horses**
  - Never
  - Some episodes
  - Occasional episodes
  - Every episode
  - Count
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], [ʃ], [θ]
  - (dh) – [dh], [ʃ], [θ]
  - (l) – [l], [ɻ], [ɻ/ɻ]
- Vowels: instrumental acoustic analysis
  - formant plots show height/backness of vowels
  - Weber’s fractions confirm audible differences
Police drama: *The Bill* - Characters

- **Inspector Gina Gold** (2002 -)
- **PC Kerry Young** (2002 – 2004)
- **PC Reg Hollis** (1984 - )
- **PC Nick Klein** (1999 – 2004)
The Bill – TH-Fronting

chars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>TH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DANNY</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KERRY</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MATT</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MICKEY</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Bill – DH-Fronting

![Bar Chart]

- Danny: 100% DH
- Kerry: 70% DH, 30% V
- Matt: 90% DH, 10% V
- Mickey: 60% DH, 40% V
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

/th/_Only Fools and Horses

DELBOY          RODNEY          TRIGGER          MARLENE          UNCLE AL

characters

%  100%  80%  60%  40%  20%  0%

0  F  TH

characters

NAME: DEREK EDWARD TROTTER
PLAYED BY: DAVID JASON

NAME: RODNEY CHARLTON TROTTER
PLAYED BY: NICHOLAS LYNDhurst

NAME: COLIN BALL (TRIGGER)
PLAYED BY: ROGER LLOYD-PACK

NAME: MARLENE BOYCE
PLAYED BY: SUE HOLDERNESS

NAME: ALBERT TROTTER (UNCLE ALBERT)
PLAYED BY: BUSTER MERRYFIELD
Only Fools and Horses – DH-Fronting

/dh/ - Only Fools and Horses

- DELBOY
- RODNEY
- TRIGGER
- MARLENE

Characters

%
Only Fools and Horses – L-Vocalisation

![Bar chart showing vocalisation frequencies for different characters in Only Fools and Horses.](chart.png)
Only Fools and Horses – Vowels

‘this is’

‘jacket’

![Graph showing vowel sounds in 'this is' and 'jacket' with markers for trap, palm, kit, goose, and foot.](image)
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
Pat Butcher: 12.06.1986 – Bookmaker staff
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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfie</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Mo</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EastEnders – TH-Fronting
EastEnders – DH-Fronting
EastEnders – L-Vocalisation

All L_EastEnders

characters

%
EastEnders – Vowels - female

‘true’

‘do it for me’
‘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)
Selected references


Hannisdal, B. (2003). 'An empirical study of some variable features in broadcast RP', Poster presented at *UKLVC4*, University of Sheffield


websites for the programmes

http://www.bbc.co.uk/eastenders/
http://www.thebill.com/
http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/onlyfools/