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Dartspeak and Estuary English

Advanced metropolitan speech in Ireland and England

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Abstract

The present paper is concerned with two putative varieties of English in London and Dublin, namely Estuary English and Dartspeak. It considers what linguistic features can be associated with these labels and examines the parallels and differences between the two forms of English, both from an internal linguistic and an external sociolinguistic point of view. In particular the motivation for the rise of these varieties is considered. The comparison between Dublin and London shows that the new variety of Dublin English has been triggered by the desire of the non-local speakers in the capital to dissociate from those who have a strong local identification and accent. The developments in and around London are more of a compromise between strongly local forms of English and a standard – Received Pronunciation – which has been perceived in recent decades as increasingly stand-offish and class-conscious.

Introduction

The purpose of the present paper is to compare two prominent forms of English in the capitals of Great Britain and of Ireland respectively. These two forms are called ‘Estuary English’ and ‘Dartspeak’ respectively and the terms have a certain popular currency in the countries where they are found. From a linguistic point of view the terms are not without their difficulties as the attempts to define these entities are well-known and have been discussed by several authors, at least for Estuary English (Altendorf 2003: 9-26). Whether Estuary English is a distinct linguistic entity is a matter of debate, some authors, such as Paul Kerswill, tend to view it as a position on a scale which stretches from Cockney to Received Pronunciation. Dartspeak, on the other hand, refers to the new pronunciation of Irish English which appeared in the 1990s in Ireland and which has been the subject of much comment in Ireland, especially given its use in Irish national television and in the media in general.

The labels ‘Estuary English’ and ‘Dartspeak’ are catchy but in fact quite vague. Estuary English refers to forms of mainstream English spoken in the area of the Thames Estuary and owes its popularity not least to the alliteration of the two words it consists of. Dartspeak is derived from the DART, an acronym for Dublin Area Rapid Transport, a suburban railway line which runs along the edge of Dublin Bay. The second element in the compound, ‘speak’, has connotations of a special jargon, such as ‘Newspeak’ in George Orwell’s novel *1984*. In the case of

Dartspeak, the reference is clearly to the portion of the railway line on the southern part of Dublin Bay which runs through a desirable residential area and which is associated, in the popular imagination, with the variety in question. There are other labels which are found in Dublin and which have roughly the same denotation: 'Dublin 4' accent is an older term from the 1980s which refers to a well-to-do postal district in Dublin which was associated, rightly or wrongly, with emerging forms of speech in the capital. Later this label was reduced to 'D4', especially because the term 'Dublin 4' quickly became dated in the 1990s.

What both Estuary English and Dartspeak have in common is that they are emerging varieties in a metropolitan context which have a degree of awareness for the inhabitants of the capital cities in which they are spoken. Both forms furthermore share an origin in dissociation (Hickey 2000): Estuary English can, at least partly, be seen as a reaction by mainstream speakers to conservative forms of Received Pronunciation which are not always well received in modern British society. With Dartspeak, the element of dissociation is much stronger: emerging forms of Dublin English in the late 1980s and 1990s had their origin in the dissociation of elements of Dublin society from what they regarded as a confining and all too local culture in the city (Hickey 2000).

The concern in this contribution is with phonetic features. This means that grammatical features, which could be construed as part of Estuary English, such as the so-called 'confrontational' question tag, as in *I said I was going, didn't I* or prepositional uses, such as *I got off of the bench, I looked out of the window*, are not considered. These and other characteristics are by no means exclusive to Estuary English and can hardly be used as defining features. Equally, there are no grammatical features which can be identified with Dartspeak and so no discussion of the grammar of Dublin English will be offered (see relevant sections of Hickey 2005 for more information on this level of Dublin English).

In the following the label 'Dartspeak' will be used in the sense of a new pronunciation of Irish English which arose in the past decade or so in Dublin. At the time of writing (Spring 2006) it is probably correct to say that this new pronunciation has become mainstream for the majority of Dubliners under 25, certainly for all females in this age bracket, who do not use the local pronunciation of English. This means that the reference to Dartspeak as a 'new' pronunciation is only of limited value but is regarded as such within the context of this paper. This also means that here the label 'mainstream' refers to an increasingly old-fashioned form of Dublin English but one with which Dartspeak contrasted at the time of its genesis. In this context, consider the following remarks, by a well-known Irish commentator on public life in present-day Ireland, are typical:

'For many years Irish scholars tried to downplay the loss of our native language by the elevation of what was called Hiberno-English. This was the English spoken here - a type of hybrid English which was the result of our dropping our native language for English in the 19th century. ... However, it is now being replaced by Malahidelect (the speech in an affluent suburb in Dublin - RH) which is now so ubiquitous amongst the teenagers there is little doubt that it will be the lingua franca of the next generation.' (McWilliams 2005: 26-7)

The association of the new pronunciation with well-to-do parts of Dublin city is

common nowadays. For my part, I will keep to the term ‘Dartspeak’ although I am aware that there is not general agreement that this label is the preferred means of referring to the new pronunciation of Dublin English. Again within the confines of this contribution it is regarded as a convenient counterpart to the equally catchy phrase ‘Estuary English’, which is also equally imprecise, but nonetheless preferred by many commenting on changing forms of pronunciation.

One reason for the lack of agreement on what both Dartspeak and Estuary English refer to is that neither is a clearly focussed variety. There is a certain fluidity in the features which can be associated with either variety. This in turn is due to the relevant recency of both varieties and, in the case of Estuary English, to the further fact that it is more an area on a cline rather than an independent variety without a further ‘standard’ variety above it, as is the case with Dartspeak.

Geographical factors are important in the case of Estuary English. Przedlacka (1999: 12-16, 2001) is of the opinion that it does not have clear geographical boundaries and hence is not focussed. Furthermore, she states that some of its prominent features behave differently in the areas immediately surrounding London, i.e. in the Home Counties. Here T-glottaling seems to be a feature which is favoured by young women (a trend confirmed by Fabricius 2002b) whereas as L-vocalisation is not.

Profiling Dartspeak

The central feature of Dartspeak which separates it from earlier mainstream forms of Dublin English is a vowel shift which became apparent in Dublin in the late 1980s (Hickey 1998, 1999). This consists of a retraction and raising of vowels and of the onset of diphthongs with a low or back starting point.

<i>Summary of the present-day Dublin Vowel Shift</i>				
a)	retraction of diphthongs with a low or back starting point			
	<i>time</i>	[tʌɪm]	→	[tɔɪm]
	<i>toy</i>	[tɔɪ]	→	[tɔɪ], [toɪ]
b)	raising of low back vowels			
	<i>cot</i>	[kɒ̃t]	→	[kɔ̃t]
	<i>caught</i>	[kɒ̃:t]	→	[kɔ̃:t], [ko:t]
				oɪ o:
				↑ ↑
Raising		ɔɪ	ɔ	ɔ:
		↑	↑	↑
			ɒɪ	ɒ
				ɒ:
Retraction	aɪ	→	ɑɪ	

The vowel changes are by no means the only changes which have taken place in

recent Dublin English. Vis à vis mainstream forms of Dublin English a number of other shifts can be noted.

<i>Mainstream Dublin English</i>	<i>New Dublin English, 'Dartspeak'</i>
velarised /r/	retroflex /r/
alveolar /l/	velarised /l/
central onset in MOUTH set	fronted onset in MOUTH set
retracted /a/ before /r/	fronted /a/ before /r/
no T-flapping	some T-flapping
no FOR/FOUR-merger	FOR/FOUR-merger
unrounded vowel in SQUARE set	rounded vowel in SQUARE set

The change among liquids in Dartspeak is a mirror image of conversative mainstream Dublin English: /r/ becomes retroflex and /l/ becomes velarised. This shows clearly the 'reactionary' nature of the recent sound shifts. Some features are, however, shared with local forms of Dublin English, although this is the variety which the shift is most definitely dissociating from. The onset of the diphthong in the MOUTH lexical set shares a front starting point with local Dublin English but not with mainstream Dublin English. It also shows a fronted /a/ in the START lexical set which it shares with local Dublin English. However, features of the latter which are very salient are never used in Dartspeak. Consider the long, long unrounded vowel in the SQUARE lexical set: [skwɛ:(ɪ)] in local Dublin English but [skwɛ:ɾ] or [skwɔ:ɾ] in Dartspeak. The rounding of this vowel, and that in the NURSE lexical set, cf. [nɔ:ɾs], is a clear item of dissociation. The retroflex /r/ of Dartspeak can now be understood in terms of dissociation from local Dublin English: the low rhoticity of local Dublin English means that the retroflex /r/ is at the opposite end of a cline of rhoticity with Dartspeak showing the highest value, local Dublin English the lowest value with mainstream varieties ranging somewhere in between.

Dartspeak is not a single homogenous variety so that one finds variation within new Dublin English. T-flapping, e.g. *letter* ['lɛɾɛɾ], is common among young females but is rare among males (as established in the data collections for Dublin English contained on the CD-ROM accompanying Hickey 2005).

Relative salience plays a role in the retention of local features in Dartspeak. The long vowel in words like *frost* [frɔ:st], *cost* [cɔ:st], what I term SOFT-lengthening, is an established feature of Dublin English which has been continued here, although it has been replaced by a short vowel in mainstream varieties of British English. Because of its presence in both local and mainstream varieties of Dublin English, it has been retained in Dartspeak as well.

It should also be mentioned that there are features which both mainstream Dublin English and Dartspeak share and which contrast with local Dublin English. For instance, both show a lowered and unrounded vowel in the STRUT lexical set, while local Dublin English retains the high back vowel of early modern English.

This feature is probably the most salient of all, especially as it occurs in the local pronunciation of the city's name: [ˈdublɪn].

Prosody also plays a role in Dartspeak. There is a strong tendency, especially on the part of young females, to use a rising intonation. Again this has been the subject of comment, consider McWilliams again when talking about the new pronunciation: ‘The intonation has to be that Australian half-question rising inflection at the end ... Notice the rising intonation towards the end of a sentence making all sentences sound like questions. This is Malahidelect, 21st century Estuary Irish ...’ (McWilliams 2005: 26).

Profiling Estuary English

The term ‘Estuary English’ was invented by the language teacher David Rosewarne in 1984 and has since been taken up by journalists and public alike (Coggle 1993: 24-35). It is the label for a variety of English intermediate between RP and Cockney. It makes a vague reference to the Thames estuary, implying that the variety is spoken in counties which border on this river and, of course, that it is spoken in London. The term is something of a misnomer as its features are found outside the Home Counties, particularly in the triangle drawn by the three cities Cambridge (north), London (south) and Oxford (west). It is also found along the coastal south and south-east, areas which are not adjacent to the River Thames.

Both Dartspeak and Estuary English are regarded as cool by the urban communities where they occur. For this reason they show a clear tendency to spread. In the case of Estuary English one can see that it already encompasses not just the Home Counties but the Thames Valley and is found in many urban centres north of this, such as those in the West Midlands, the Mersey areas and as far north as Tyneside.

Estuary English does not have immediate class implications, for instance, many inhabitants of the south-east which could be classified conventionally as middle-class – non-manual workers of various kinds – speak a variety which shows the features which Rosewarne, and those who followed him, saw as typical of Estuary English.

The features which are generally associated with Estuary English can be shown in two tables, one demonstrating its difference to Cockney and one illustrating its difference to RP.

<i>Estuary English / RP</i>	<i>Cockney</i>
no H-dropping	H-dropping, e.g. <i>hand</i> [ænd]
no TH-fronting	TH-fronting, e.g. <i>think</i> [fɪŋk]
no MOUTH- monophthong	MOUTH-monophthong, e.g. <i>town</i> [tə:n]
no intervocalic T-glottaling	intervocalic T-glottaling, e.g. <i>pity</i> [ˈpɪʔi]

<i>Estuary English / Cockney</i>	<i>Received Pronunciation</i>
variable HAPPY-tensing, e.g. <i>pretty</i> [ˈprɪti]	no HAPPY-tensing
vocalisation of preconsonantal, final /l/, e.g. <i>spilt</i> [spɪlʊt]	no vocalisation of preconsonantal, final /l/
final T-glottaling, e.g. <i>cut</i> [kʌʔ]	no final T-glottaling
yod coalescence in stressed syllables, e.g. <i>tune</i> [tʃu:n]	no yod coalescence in stressed syllables
some diphthong shift in FACE, PRICE, GOAT, e.g. [fæɪs], [praɪs], [gɔʊt]	no such diphthong shift

The intermediate position of Estuary English on a scale of relative standardness in south-east British English may well be the result of two social tendencies: the first is the desire of local speakers to lose some of the more salient features of their speech. This applies particularly to non-binary features such as diphthong shift in the FACE, PRICE and GOAT lexical sets as speakers can move up and down this scale continuously. The second trend is the opposite: the wish on the part of RP speakers to be more contemporary and less posh in their speech. This involves the adoption of certain, but by no means all, features of Cockney as shown in the above tables.

Some lexicalised features may also appear in the speech of Estuary English speakers, e.g. the pronunciation of final /-k/ in words ending in *-thing*, e.g. *something* [ˈsʌmθɪŋk]. Cluster simplification may also be found as in /nt/ > /n/ intervocalically, e.g. *twenty* [ˈtweni], *plenty* [ˈpleni].

Of all the features listed above, the two, which could be highlighted as the most active trends in the speech of middle-class south-east British, are (i) T-glottaling, both word-finally and, increasingly, intervocalically, e.g. *but* [bʌʔ] and *butter* [ˈbʌʔə] and (ii) L-vocalisation as in *milk* [mɪʊk], *help* [heʊp].

Parallels and differences between Dartspeak and Estuary English

Yod-deletion is an established feature of Irish English after sonorants in stressed syllables. Thus one has [nu:z] and [lur:t] for *news* and *lute* respectively. This deletion tends to spread to other contexts, e.g. after an alveolar fricative, e.g. *suit* [su:t]. Yod deletion after labials and velars is unknown, i.e. yod is present in words like *mute* and *cute*. It is also not found after alveolar stops, i.e. *tune* and *stew* both show yod. What is termed yod-coalescence in Estuary English is an established feature of Dublin and Irish English so that *due* and *Jew* are always homophonous and hence contrast does exist here. ST-palatalisation, the use of [ʃ] rather than [s] in words like *stew*, is not found in Dublin English. Indeed in those words where there is variation between [ʃ] and [s] Dublin English shows a preference for the latter, e.g. *issue* [ˈɪsu:] and *appreciate* [əˈpri:ʃi:et].

Certain consonantal features are prominent in Estuary English, such as T-glottalisation, L-vocalisation and R-vocalisation (Tollfree 1999). The last is an inherent feature of south-east British English and not a process to be observed in any emerging varieties. However, the realisation of /r/ is subject to change, especially in the labialisation of /r/ which can be observed in Britain (Trudgill 1988).

There are features which are found in Dublin English but not in south-east British English, e.g. word-initial /h-/ is always present in Dublin (and the rest of Ireland) and so the contrast of *h*-deletion and *h*-retention is not present in Ireland. TH-fronting, as in [fri:] for *three*, is completely unknown in Irish English and hence is not an option for any speaker group in Dublin.

The status of features varies as well. While T-glottalisation is becoming increasingly established in colloquial forms of RP (Wells 1994), it is still very much stigmatised in Dublin English and is definitely not part of either mainstream varieties or the new pronunciation.

A comparison of the linguistic features of Dartspeak and Estuary English shows how both similar and different features have varying status in both varieties, on the one hand depending on whether they occur in local forms of English and on the other hand on what the relationship is to both local forms and more standard, RP-like varieties.

Dartspeak (DS) and Estuary English (EE)

	<i>DS feature</i>	<i>status</i>	<i>EE feature</i>	<i>comment</i>
1)	back vowel raising	innovation	✓	RP
2)	GOAT-diphthongisation	innovation	✓	RP
3)	HAPPY-tensing	continuation	HAPPY-tensing	not RP
4)	yod deletion	continuation	✓	not RP
5)	yod coalescence	continuation	✓	not RP
6)	velarised [ɨ]	innovation	[ɨ] vocalisation	partially RP
7)	retroflex [ɻ]	innovation	—	—
8)	T-flapping	continuation	—	—
9)	—	—	T-glottalling finally	partially RP
10)	—	—	linking- <i>r</i>	RP
11)	MOUTH-fronting	continuation	MOUTH-monophthong	Cockney
12)	—	—	FACE-lowering	Cockney
13)	—	—	H-deletion	Cockney
14)	—	—	TH-fronting	Cockney
15)	—	—	T-glottalling internally	Cockney

Notes

- 1) The raising of back vowels is a feature of both RP and, in more advanced form, of Cockney (Wells 1982: 256f.). This should be seen in connection with FACE-lowering (11). Because the vowel shift in Dublin English is more restricted, it

- only affects back vowels. There is no shift with the vowels in the FLEECE or FACE lexical sets.
- 2) This is a significant parallel between Dublin English and Estuary English. Furthermore, both local Dublin and local London show a lowering of the diphthong onset in GOAT, i.e. both have a vowel like [ʌɔ].
 - 3) HAPPY-tensing is general in the south of Ireland and always has been apparently.
 - 4,5) Yod deletion (j > Ø, *new* [nu:]) and yod coalescence ([tj] > [tʃ], *tutor* [tʃu:tə]) are uncontroversial in Irish English (Hickey 2004b).
 - 6) Velarised [ɫ] in new Dublin English is not showing any signs of vocalisation as in Estuary English.
 - 7,8) Syllable-final /r/ is a major difference between Ireland and south-east England. This is retroflex [ɻ] in Dartspeak, see comments above. T-flapping is also a feature without a counterpart in south-east British English.
 - 9,15) T-glottalling is highly stigmatised in Dublin and hence avoided in new Dublin English. On its increased occurrence and acceptance in RP, see Fabricius (2002b). On the spread of glottalisation, see Milroy, Milroy and Hartley (1994).
 - 10) Because new Dublin English is highly rhotic, there is no linking *r*.
 - 11) There is no indication in Dublin English that the fronted realisation of MOUTH, i.e. [mæʊt̚] (new Dublin English) and [mɛʊt] (local Dublin English), is being smoothed to a monophthong.
 - 13) H-deletion is a feature of urban vernaculars in Britain but not found in Ireland.
 - 14) TH-fronting is not found in Ireland although historically it is attested for the archaic dialect of Forth and Bargo (south-east of Ireland, died out early 19th century).
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The spread of new Dublin English

Ireland is a centrally organised country and with something under one third of the population living in the metropolitan area, Dublin outweighs all other cities put together. Most prestigious organisations are located in the capital as are the government and the national radio and television service. There are also three universities in the city along with numerous colleges. For these and other reasons, the status of Dublin English is greater than that of any other city or region in the country. In the context of the recent changes, this has meant that the new pronunciation has spread rapidly to the rest of the country. For all young people, especially females, who do not identify themselves linguistically with their own locality, the new pronunciation is their phonological norm. This fact has been confirmed many times over by the recordings in *A Sound Atlas of Irish English* (Hickey 2004a). An important consequence of this is that the new pronunciation is fast becoming the mainstream, supraregional variety of Irish English. Young people outside Dublin are not necessarily aware of the dissociation which was the original driving force behind the rise of the new pronunciation in Dublin. But because young people's speech in Dublin is 'cool' (Hickey 2003a), it is being adopted by other young people who probably unconsciously see it as a means of partaking in the urban sophistication of the capital.

Conclusion

This brief examination of trends in pronunciation in the metropolitan regions of Ireland and England has shown parallels and differences. Social motivation lies behind the developments in both cases. The Irish situation is different from that in England as no standard of English in Ireland was readily available for those speakers who, in the 1990s, wished to move away from more local forms of speech in the capital. For that reason, they could not just adopt a variety already present in their surroundings. Instead a variety arose based on dissociation from more local varieties. The juxtaposition of new and local features shows clearly how the former are diametrically opposed to the latter, with the exception of some traditional, non-salient features. In south-east England the situation was different: a standard pronunciation was available, but was viewed as increasingly inappropriate for the modern world. A movement towards the local vernacular took place and is still doing so. The newer, demotic variety of toned-down RP has served as a bridge between social groups and may continue to do so. Its future development is uncertain, given the scalar nature of varieties between Cockney and RP, but the increasing adoption of local features into varieties higher up the scale seems to be a definite tendency (Wells 1994). This does not appear to be the case in Dublin English, most probably because of social pretension (Hickey 2003b) and the notion that a new Ireland has arisen and is here to stay (the current pace of change in Ireland is much greater than in England). The altered conception of themselves, which non-local Irish have today, would militate against the adoption of local features into newer varieties of Irish English.

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