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The Internal and External Dichotomy Again

Teasing Apart Motives for Language Change

Raymond Hickey♦

The internal–external dichotomy

The factors which are responsible for language change can be classified in a number of ways, a common division being that between internal and external factors (Gerritsen and Stein, 1992; Jones and Esch, 2002; Jones and Singh 2005: 1-54; Hickey, 2012). Internal factors have very often to do with the establishment of morphological regularity (analogical levelling and possible analogical extension, Campbell, 2013: 91-106; Lahiri, 2000). Internally-motivated change is taken to rest on structural considerations in a language/variety and many authors see explanations based on structure as having primacy over other factors (Lass and Wright, 1986).

External factors have primarily to do with the role of language in society and adjustments in speech made by one social group reacting to another. The levels of language first affected are usually phonetics and phonology, though others may be later subject to change. This is the case because on the sound level the greatest degree of minute variation can be achieved and hence the finest type of sociolinguistic assessment is possible; this issue will be further discussed below.

The internal–external division

The binary division of types of change into internally and externally motivated stems from linguistic analysis and does not appear to be grounded in speakers' awareness of such a division. Because of this, the division might be demoted to

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an artefact of the analysis. Hence, the two main questions for this study are (i) is there independent evidence for this division, i.e. is the division into two types justified by linguistic data and the behaviour of speakers and (ii) is there a clear and consistent binary division, assuming that the division is valid in the first place.

Any change which can be traced to structural considerations in a language and which is independent of sociolinguistic factors could be classified as internally-motivated. A change which would appear to be triggered and guided by social considerations can be labelled externally-motivated. Obvious examples include both accommodation (Trudgill, 1986: Chapter 1) by speakers towards a social group with certain linguistic features as well as dissociation (Hickey, 2013) from a social group whose speech is regarded as undesirable. Accommodation leads to the adoption of features already present in the group being accommodated towards, or to the development of intermediary features, while dissociation can result in the development of new features not already present in the speech of the group engaged in dissociation but which are essentially different from those in the group from which the dissociation is occurring. This applies above all to the level of sounds, but the situation on the grammatical level is not necessarily different in principle. However, given that the number of tokens which could theoretically trigger change across groups is smaller and that these do not appear in speech with the same degree of frequency and predictability as do phonetic features, the significance of grammatical features as triggers of change is less. Thus those scholars dealing with morphosyntactic change stress the role of token occurrence in establishing change: "Frequency determines which linguistic tokens and abstract types (structures) become automated and entrenched within the processing system" (Fischer, 2006: 325).

There are inherent advantages to understanding different sources for language change and what course this change can take. For instance, considering social motivation as a central factor can improve the understanding of apparently counterintuitive instances of change, or at least of those changes which would not be expected on purely language-internal, structural grounds. In addition, social factors can help to account for the reversal of change and for the important issue of non-change. As Milroy states: "In order to account for differential patterns of change at particular times and places, we need first to take account of those factors that tend to maintain language states and resist change" (Milroy, 1992: 10). Somewhat later he states this even more explicitly: "…if we pose the more basic question of why some forms and varieties are *maintained* while others change, we cannot avoid reference to society." (Milroy, 1992: 220).

Language change is not just about the rise of new features but about any type of alteration to the configuration of a language. Thus, mergers (Hickey, 2014a) are types of change and the more general processes of dialect levelling and new dialect formation (Hickey, 2003; Trudgill, 2004) represent equally valid instances

of change although the amount of variation in a community is normally reduced in both these cases.

Interpretations of the internal–external division

Another use of the internal – external distinction refers to change taking place within a community and change activated by contact with an outside group. Both these uses and their relatedness can be shown as follows.

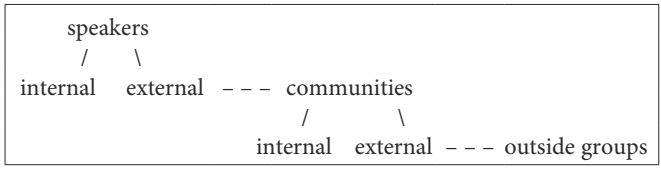


Figure 1. *Different perspectives on the internal-external distinction*

To avoid confusion in this paper the labels 'speaker-internal' and 'speaker-external' will be used to refer to the first sense of the present dichotomy while 'community-internal' and 'community-external' refers to the second sense (shown on the right of Figure 1). This distinction is central to all work on language contact (Hickey, 2020; Winford, 2005, 2013). However, for reasons of space the distinction between 'community-internal' and 'community-external' language change will not be discussed in this study.

Regularisation

Irregularity across languages is a phenomenon which is constantly about to arise due to the use of language. A common source is phonetic change, e.g. the weakening of endings in words, which can lead to a lack of clarity on the morphological level. The demise of inflections in the late Old English and into the Middle English period led to generations of speakers reanalysing the system of decaying inflections with verbs (Allen, 2016; Kortmann, 2012). The present tense endings had been reduced to *-s*. Some varieties had done away with endings in the present entirely, e.g. East Anglian English, possibly under the influence of contact with Dutch (Trudgill, 1998). But most varieties, starting it is believed in the North of England, began to systematise the use of present tense *-s* into a special system of verbal concord known by its traditional name, the Northern Subject Rule (Ihalainen, 1994: 214-222). Essentially, this rule states that an inflection is found on a verb in the present tense, regardless of number, if the subject is not a pronoun, i.e. *the men works* but *they speak*. This kind of regularisation of a system which had become entirely irregular due to inflectional loss is a prime example of a change which was internally triggered. A similar example, this time from nominal morphology, would be the regularisation of the plural system of English,

with *-s* becoming the dominant pattern, both as that used for all new words as well as that which came to replace formerly different plural types, such as the nasal plurals found in words like *eye, cow, shoe*, etc., with the old plural surviving longest in morphologically conservative dialects, above all in Scotland.

With reflexive pronouns one can find analogical formations from possessive pronouns due to regularisation of the reflexive pronoun paradigm, e.g. *hisself*, *theirselves*, given that for the first and second person the possessive pronouns form the base for the reflexive pronouns.

Regularisation of the type just discussed can be assumed to have its root in first language learners reanalysing an irregular system while constructing their own grammar of the language in question. Comparable regularisation can be found in another scenario where adults may be involved. This is where there is language shift in a situation of unguided adult second language acquisition. This characterised the shift from Irish to English in Ireland from at least the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. An example of such regularisation is epistemic *must* in the negative. In standard English this is negated using *can*. But in Irish, Scottish, much of northern English and Australian English *musn't* can be used: *She musn't be Scottish* for *She can't be Scottish*.

Short front vowel lowering (SFVL)

Short front vowels have been relatively stable during the history of English. The only major shift involving these vowels was a raising which became apparent, and was commented on, in eighteenth century works of prescriptivism. This trend was reversed during the early twentieth century. However, in recent years a more obvious lowering has affected the lexical sets DRESS and TRAP with the former showing an [æ]-like vowel and the latter an [a]-like vowel with the high vowel in KIT also being lowered. Such lowering would seem to be a fairly recent phenomenon in the anglophone world. For instance, neither Docherty (2010) nor Deterding (2010), in their overviews of phonological variation in Britain and across forms of English outside the British Isles respectively, mention the lowering of the KIT, DRESS and TRAP vowels which has come to prominence across the anglophone world. Nonetheless, a certain general awareness of the vowel lowering has arisen, just consider the discussions of [jæs] (often lengthened) as a pronunciation of *yes* which one can find on the internet.

Descriptions of this lowering exist for (Northern) California by Penelope Eckert (2012). For Canada, SFVL has been described by Charles Boberg (2005, 2012) and a little earlier by Sandra Clarke and her colleagues (Clarke, Elms and Youssef, 1995). It would also seem to be spreading to the Southern Hemisphere, to South Africa (Chevalier, 2016) and to Australia, see Cox and Palethorpe (2008, 2012). In the British Isles, the shift has been found in Ireland (Hickey, 2016: 28-31) and in Scotland (Holmes-Elliot and Smith, 2015).

Short front vowels in varieties of English

Any discussion of change assumes that there is a clear point of departure compared to which the new realisations represent change. Traditionally, the keywords KIT, DRESS and TRAP were transcribed, and presumably realised, as follows: [kɪt], [dres] and [træp] respectively (Upton, 2008: 241). At least that would have held for supraregional British and American English in the mid-twentieth century, although the TRAP vowel did and does have a widespread tensed realisation before nasals (in words like *man, can, and*) in the United States.

It is difficult to pinpoint where and when Short Front Vowel Lowering (SFVL) began but some forms of English give us clues about how short front vowels developed in the past two centuries. From the history of varieties of English in the Southern Hemisphere (Hickey, 2014b: 157-158, 293), chiefly in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand where English settlement began in earnest at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it is known (see e.g. Branford, 1994: 477) that short front vowels were raised somewhat, i.e. words like *catch* were pronounced with a vowel closer to [e] than [æ]. Examinations of recordings of Received Pronunciation speakers from the early twentieth century, e.g. of the writer Virginia Woolf (Hickey, 2017), also show raised front vowels of the type characteristic of traditional Southern Hemisphere varieties of English. However, during the course of the twentieth century, especially with moderate RP speakers after WWII, lower pronunciations of the short front vowels began to appear and now at the beginning of the twenty-first century an [ɛ] in the TRAP lexical set is distinctly old-fashioned and hardly found at all (see Bauer, 1994: 120-121). The movement away from higher realisations of short front vowels is clear in present-day standard southern British English (Received Pronunciation, RP) so that one has for DRESS and TRAP pronunciations closer to [drɛs] and [træp] ~ [trap] respectively (Upton, 2008: 242; 2012: 63). So it would seem that the lowering being examined in the present paper is in tune with a more general, if less extreme, lowering of short front vowels in British English in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century. The essential difference between advanced RP and the Short Front Vowel Lowering dealt with here is the lowering of KIT (in North America) and the very open realisation of the DRESS vowel as [dræs]. In addition, the TRAP vowel is a centralised [a] rather than the more fronted, but low, [a] vowel found in current RP in England.

The California Vowel Shift

Research on the present lowering of short front vowels was first carried out on English in California and in Canada. The lowering in the large, westernmost state of the USA consists of a series of vowel shifts which are typical of young speakers, especially females, initially more in the north of the state (Eckert, 2012) but by

now (2019) a geographical distinction between the north and south cannot be strictly maintained.

In this change short front vowels are lowered, e.g. DRESS is [dræs], KIT is [ket] (but not before nasals) while TRAP is realised as [trap]. There is one important exception to this, namely the raising of the ASH-vowel [æ] when in pre-nasal position (a supraregional feature of many varieties of American English), e.g. *and* [eənd]. This means in fact that the realisation of the TRAP vowel before nasals is higher in phonological space than the unconditioned realisation of the DRESS vowel. In addition to these shifts there is a fronting of high back vowels in the GOOSE and GOAT lexical sets as well as the STRUT vowel while the PRICE diphthong shows a centralised onset.

The Canadian Shift

Since the mid-1990s (Clarke, Elms and Youssef, 1995) a lowering of front vowels has been found in supraregional forms of Canadian English. The lowering is accompanied by a degree of centralisation of the short front vowels, most clearly for the DRESS vowel (Boberg, 2012: 173) and has come to be termed the 'Canadian Shift'.

In Boberg's view the lowering of the short front vowels was apparently triggered by the retraction of the vowel in the TRAP lexical set from [æ] to [a]. This led to the lowering of DRESS with the latter 'dragging KIT down behind it' (Boberg *loc. cit.*). The remaining vowels, in the KIT and DRESS lexical sets, were lowered and centralised to some extent in the process. If this causal sequence is valid then what might have induced the retraction of the TRAP vowel, thus triggering the entire change? In the view of Boberg, the essential trigger is the existence of a COT-CAUGHT merger in Canadian English. The merger is well attested for this variety with pairs of words such as *not* and *naught* or *Don* and *dawn* not distinguished by their vowel realisations. Given furthermore that Canadian English does not have a split of the vowels in TRAP and BATH (Boberg, 2012: 170), which British English generally does, cf. *grand* [grænd] and *grant* [grɑ:nt], there are fewer vowel distinctions in the low to low-back region of phonological space in Canadian English (Figure 2).

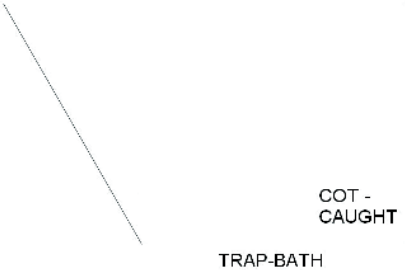


Figure 2. *Low and low-back vowels in Canadian English*

In their analysis of young adults' speech from various parts of California, Kennedy and Grama (2012) confirmed the lowering of short front vowels with a certain gender effect with females leading in the shift. This leads the authors to conclude that the shift is not clearly a pull-chain (with TRAP pulling on the other vowels), as posited by Boberg for Canadian English and may have started as an independent push chain (with KIT and DRESS pushing downwards, Kennedy and Grama, 2012: 52-53). The authors also regard the shift in Canada and that in California (Table 1) as separate phenomena and point to the differing diachrony: the Canadian Shift was already described in the mid-1990s but in the *Atlas of North American English* (Labov, Ash and Boberg, 2006) the lowering of short front vowels for California is not noted (the data for this project was collected between 1993 and 2001).

Table 1. *Short Front Vowel Lowering in Californian and Canadian English*

KIT-lowering	*bit* [bet], *bid* [bed]
DRESS-lowering	*breakfast* [brækfəst], *deck* [dæk]
TRAP-retraction	*back* [bak], *clap* [klap]
Preference before sibilants	*yes* [jæs], *best* [bæst], *west* [wæst]
Lowering before nasals	*friend* [frænd], *bend* [bænd]
Low-back merger present	*cot, caught* [kɑt]
PRICE-centralisation	*like* [ləɪk], *price* [prəɪs]

Short Front Vowel Lowering in Dublin English

In recent years young female speakers of non-vernacular Dublin English (Hickey, 2005) have been showing a lowered vowel realisation, near [æ], in the DRESS lexical set and a centralised [a] in the TRAP set. The KIT vowel is rarely lowered and only in the environment of /r-/, e.g. *rid* [red]. The LOT and STRUT vowels are, as yet, unaffected by SFVL (Figure 3). Note that there is no low-back vowel merger in Irish English, i.e. word pairs like *Don* and *dawn* are pronounced differently, as [dɒn] and [dɒ:n] respectively.

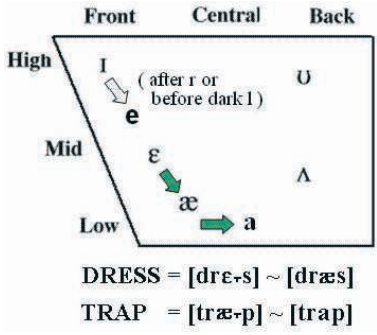


Figure 3. *The lowering of short front vowels in recent Dublin English*

The group of speakers who show SFVL in Dublin do not use the local vernacular, a stable form of English which has existed for several centuries in the city (Hickey, 2005). Instead they are non-vernacular speakers who use general supraregional (southern) Irish English, but, importantly, with the changes being described here. The group consists at present entirely of young females but does not appear to encompass all members of this group. That is, not all young females engage in SFVL but certainly enough of them to make this an established feature among this speaker group.

Integration of change into an existing system

The readiness of speakers to adopt a change from an external source has social reasons but is also determined by the linguistic configuration of their variety. One argument that can be put forward for the adoption of SFVL in recent Dublin English, is that various vowel shifts of the past two decades in Dublin have resulted in a distribution of vowels in phonological space into which lowered short front vowels fit well. The changes of the past two decades have led to a rotation of vowels from a low back position upwards and to a fronting of those vowels which were already in the higher regions of phonological space. This is illustrated in the following diagram in which MOUTH fronting refers to the use of a fronted onset for this diphthong, i.e. [mɛʊ̟] and GOAT-fronting to the use of schwa as an onset for this diphthong, i.e. [gəʊt]. By THOUGHT-raising is meant the use of a relatively high vowel, i.e. [ɒ̝:t̝], and CHOICE-raising refers to the use of a high vowel as onset for this diphthong, i.e. [tʃɔɪs].

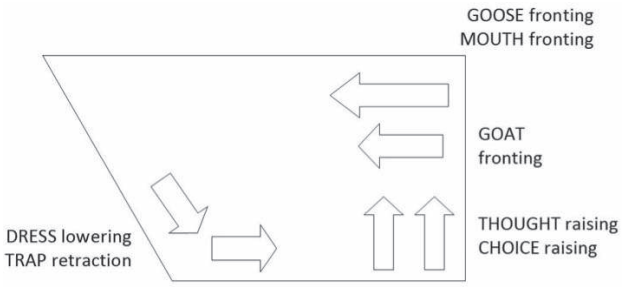


Figure 4. *The rotation of vowels in recent Dublin English*

Various arguments can be made for and against the validity of a rotation principle in vowel space. All speakers with SFVL also have GOOSE-MOUTH-GOAT-Fronting as well as THOUGHT-CHOICE-Raising. The movement away from the low back area reduced the number of vowel distinctions in this section of phonological space thus favouring the retraction of TRAP towards a low central position (Irons, 2007; Bigham, 2010; Dinkin, 2011). If this interpretation is correct

then SFVL in Dublin English is a pull shift, triggered by an under-utilisation of low back vowel space. However, if the fronting of GOOSE and MOUTH is regarded as motivating the adoption of SFVL then it is a push shift. However, an argument against this is that KIT is not really affected (except in the environment of liquids).

Vowel rotation has one further advantage: it renders the question of an exclusively external or internal motivation for SFVL less relevant for Dublin English and maybe for other varieties as well. Rather it provides a pre-existing internal argument which, given an appropriate external stimulus, can manifest itself as a rotation in vowel space which, while it will not be identical to that found elsewhere in the anglophone world, will nonetheless show sufficient similarity to be classified as the same type of change.

Vowel rotation, as illustrated in Figure 4, involved long and short monophthongs as well as diphthongs. In the history of English, vowel shifts affect one type of vowel, e.g. the Great Vowel Shift concerns long vowels while the raising of front vowels in eighteenth and nineteenth century southern British English and Southern Hemisphere varieties of English only involved short vowels. In addition, for Dublin English, the FLEECE, FACE and PRICE vowels are not affected by the movements of SFVL.

The above considerations show that the changes in short vowel realisations are externally motivated—the new vowel values come from advanced forms of English in North America—but the adoption of these changes is determined by the internal configuration of vowels already existing in advanced Dublin English.

Conclusion

The data considered in this paper would suggest that there is no watertight distinction between internal and external factors in language change. The distinction has greatest validity when considering (i) the age (life period) of the agents of change and (ii) the trigger or source of an item of change. If change occurs during the period of first language acquisition, then it is mostly motivated by the creation of regularity. This makes sense given that children go through a process of working out the structure of the language they are acquiring from their environment. They begin with making assumptions of maximum regularity and then refine these assumptions as the evidence for further differentiation increases with an increasing amount of exposure to data containing this differentiation. Later in life, especially in teenage years and early adulthood, speakers are confronted with variation within their speech community. Some of this variation, e.g. vowel values, will begin with small numbers of speakers. But it may be adopted by larger numbers and then become established. Such externally motivated change will be integrated into a system with an existing internal structure. Some such changes may be disruptive, causing extensive

irregularity while other changes may be accommodated quite easily within a system. The readiness of speakers to accept disruptive items of change depends on their social motivation to engage in potential change. The higher this motivation is, the less likely it is that change will be resisted. Thus, in this type of scenario we can recognise external sources for change but also internal adjustments to incorporate the items of change into an existing system. This process is essentially the same as with internally-motivated change as it is characterised by speakers' goal of maintaining the coherent structure of their language despite the variation they are continually exposed to.

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