Social and Internal Constraints on Dialect Levelling of Grammatical Variation in Sheffield English (1981-2020)

The current paper investigates dialect levelling and grammatical variation in Sheffield English. Using the socially stratified Corpus of Sheffield Usage, we investigate 11 grammatical variables of non-standard Sheffield English as they change over the course of three time points: 1981, 1997, and 2020. We explore two potential constraints on the loss of grammatical dialect features in the corpus: different types of social change and different types of grammatical variables.

When we compare the loss of dialect features between the historically working-class East of the city and the historically middle-class West of the city, we find the following: The East exhibits much more non-standard usage in 1981, than the West, but this changes rapidly. 39 years later the East has lost non-standard usage much more rapidly than the West, so by 2020 all differences between East and West have disappeared. These changes are shown in Figure 1.

We argue that this is best explained as a consequence of the different types of social change which have affected the different parts of the city. Where the historically working-class West of the city has mainly seen social change in the form of growing universities as well as in-migration from the rest of the country as well as abroad, the East has seen social change mainly in the form of changes in work. The latter appears to have been much more influential, through a shift from predominantly secondary sector work with smaller, denser, more multiplex social networks, to tertiary sector work with larger, less dense, and less multiplex networks, resulting in much larger shifts away from non-standard Sheffield English grammar.

Simultaneously, we explored the possibility that more cognitively 'embedded' variables were slower to undergo change than variables with less cognitive embedding. We compared variation in tense marking (e.g. non-standard *were* and past participle and simple past merger) with more lexical alternations (e.g. the use of non-standard indefinite pronouns *owt, nowt,* and *summert* and the use of *while* for Standard English *until*). We find only very tentative evidence for this.

Figure 1: Outcomes Bayesian logistic regression model with predicted probabilities of non-standard variant by variable, year, and location, as well as 80% credibility intervals.