

I'm quite (h)appy (h)ere

The curious case of /h/ in Carlisle English

H dropping is one of the most stigmatized and socially marked features in the dialects of English in England. Geographically speaking there are only a few pockets left in England where /h/ is retained in word initial position, e.g. in Northumberland and its urban area Tyneside (Beal 2008). However, for Carlisle English and Cumberland English, varieties which are spoken in close proximity to the north-east of England, historical sources such as Sullivan (1857), Ellis (1869) and Wright (1977) described the loss of /h/ in word-initial position and a recent BA thesis has shown that h-dropping is quite common in Workington in Westcumbria (Tall 2009).

In the case of Carlisle English, we have the interesting situation that the use of [h] in word initial position is increasing again after a period of considerable H dropping. This kind of change is quite unique in England but has been attested in New Zealand (Gordon 2010). This sound change could be an indication of /h/ diffusing to Cumbria from Northumberland/Newcastle where the use of velar fricatives is retained. Another possible but less likely explanation would be the reintroduction of this feature resulting from dialect contact with the two /h/ retaining varieties Scottish English and Irish English.

The aim of this talk is to have a look at real time changes of /h/ in this variety and give reasons why the use of [h] had again increased after a period of loss. The analysis is based on sociolinguistic interviews conducted between 2007 and 2010. To add the real time view on this data, oral history recordings conducted in the 1980s by the local museum have also been included in the analysis. The speakers in these recordings were born around the turn of the 20th century and were mainly factory workers, i.e. speakers who probably represent the Carlisle dialect in its most vernacular form.

References

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