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# Baths and becks

ANTHEA FRASER GUPTA

A report on two prominent dialectal variables in England

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USING rather informally collected data, I look here at two well-known variables in the English of England: first, whether there is a short or long vowel in words such as *grass* and *bath*; second, what regional words people know for *streams*. The treatment of these variables is consistent over time, and seems to have little to do with social status or carefulness of speech.

## Introduction

In order to teach aspects of sociolinguistics to Year 2 students at the University of Leeds, from 2000–2003, in two different academic years, I asked them to gather data on features known to vary in some way or another (by region, social class, or age) and which had been mapped on the basis of the data from the Survey of English Dialects (Orton & Wright 1974, Orton *et al.* 1978, Upton *et al.* 1994). Results were collected, discussed, and collated. In 2003, the project concerned variation in both pronunciation (as regards the vowel in words like *bath* and *grass*) and word geography (as regards local equivalents for the word ‘stream’, such as *beck* and *burn*).

In 2004, the University of Leeds held an alumni day, and I decided it would entertain and inform the visitors if they were asked to place their own usage of linguistic variables on a map. For this, I selected two variables that, as revealed by the students’ work, had a strongly geographical pattern in England. The variables were:

- whether a long or a short vowel was used in such words as ‘bath’ and ‘grass’
- the use of alternative words for a ‘stream’

The results from these ventures were so strikingly like the results from the Survey of English Dialects (SED), done many years earlier and with very different respondents, that I thought it worth discussion. However, it must be borne

in mind that my studies were carried out for the purposes of teaching, and did not therefore follow the demands of subject selection and methodology that would apply to a formal research project. In addition, as only England was covered by SED, the analysis of my data excludes responses from beyond England.

## The respondents

The respondents for the three studies were very different (see Table 1).

- *SED* The data was collected from 312 locations in England in 1952–1961. Most respondents were elderly farmworkers. Responses were elicited.
- *Alumni and staff (henceforth, ‘alumni’)* I collected data at Leeds on an alumni day in 2004, from 45 people drawn from the alumni (the largest single group of whom graduated in the 1950s) and the staff of the School of English (various ages). Respondents were asked where they were from, and were invited to note down any difficulties they had about answering the questions, due to relocation during adolescence. They were asked first to indicate whether they had the same vowel in *grass* as in *cat* or as in *palm* and *father*, then to supply the word for a stream used in their places of origin.
- *Students* In 2002, I got information from 38 University of Leeds students of English from

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**Table 1: Data sources**

|                                      | <i>Survey of English Usage (SED)</i>                      | Leeds University alumni (& staff)  | Leeds University students  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| <i>Number of persons involved</i>    | over 312  | 45   | <i>stream</i> : 38<br><i>grass</i> : 61  |
| <i>Date of study</i>                 | 1952–1961   | 2004   | <i>stream</i> : 2002<br><i>grass</i> : 2003  |
| <i>Date of birth of the majority</i> | late 19th century   | mid 20th century   | late 20th century  |
| <i>Dominant social class</i>         | farm workers  | mostly middle-class origins and upper middle class by personal achievement | mostly middle-class origins, and mostly middle class by achievement. 2002 sample included some friends and relatives of students, of unknown background. |
| <i>Method of elicitation</i>         | interview, with both elicitation and directed questioning | self-reporting with assistance from a trained linguist                     | self-reporting   |

England, aged 19–25. Respondents were shown a photograph, and were asked to name the thing shown, with the prompt ‘This is too small to be a river. What is it?’ They were told, ‘If you use more than one word for the thing, list them all, with your most usual one first.’ In 2003, data were obtained from 81 speakers from England, consisting of University of Leeds students of English, and their friends and family members, 67 of whom were under the age of 30. Respondents were asked to read the sentence ‘In summer, students picnic on the grass’ and their performance was classified by the student.

The alumni and students of Leeds could be said to be middle class, in contrast with the farm workers surveyed by the SED. Three generations are represented here: the SED respondents, born largely at the end of the nineteenth century; the alumni and staff of Leeds, the majority of whom were born in the middle of the twentieth century; and the Leeds students, the majority of whom were born in the 1970s and 80s.

### **The BATH lexical set**

Nearly all dialects of England have a clear distinction between a short vowel in the TRAP lexical set, and a long vowel in the PALM lexical

set (for the concept of lexical sets, see Wells 1982). The BATH set is a set of words in which some accents have the same vowel as TRAP and others the same vowel as PALM (Wells 1982 I:133ff). Outside England, the pattern of distribution is complicated due to rhoticity (the pronunciation of *r* in all positions) and to the presence of accents with little or no distinction between short and long vowels, but within England, the treatment of the BATH set is a shibboleth used to distinguish northern accents of England (with a short vowel) from southern accents (with a long vowel). It is only in those few areas of England that preserve rhoticity, especially the southwest (Wells 1982 II: 345f), that this is not a straightforward issue of allocation of word to a long or short vowel.

The BATH lexical set is not homogeneous in terms either of its history or its current treatment. Some of the words in this set (such as *aunt*, *dance*, *chance*) have a complex history, with origins mostly in borrowings into Middle English from French. They entered English with an *au* spelling which, according to Dobson (1968 II:786), corresponded to a diphthong that was later monophthongised into a short *a* in some areas and a long *a* in other areas. The North-South divide based on the allocation of this lexical set to a long or short vowel goes back to the fourteenth century (Dobson 1968 II: 555f): this is a very old

dialectal feature indeed. Others (such as *grass*) are from Old English short *a* or short *æ*, and were lengthened in accents of Southern England, especially before fricatives, a development seen as being ‘vulgar’ by writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Mugglestone 1995: 90ff). The lexical set is unstable, with a number of words (such as *plaster*, *chaff*, and *mass*) fluctuating within the same accent (Wells 1982 I:135). The word on which I collected responses, *grass*, is a core member of the BATH lexical set, which is likely to follow the predictable pattern for allocation to lexical set by the speaker.

Wells and Mugglestone (1995) both attribute social as well as geographical significance to the allocation of a long or short vowel to the BATH lexical set.

Wells (1982:134) claims that ‘[i]n the north of England ... there is sociolinguistic variation between the two’, although:

[r]etention of a short vowel in BATH words extends much further up the social scale than does the retention of unsplit /*ʊ*/. In Cannock [Staffordshire] the BATH vowel was found to be a consistent short /*a*/ in the three lowest social classes, variable for the next-to-highest, and long /*a:*/ only for the highest of the five social classes recognized in the study (Heath 1980). There are many educated northerners who would not be caught dead doing something so vulgar as to pronounce STRUT words with [ʊ], but who would feel it to be a denial of their identity as northerners to say BATH words with anything other than short [a].

(Wells 1982 II:354).

Mugglestone (1995:90) says that:

Its realization as a long [a:] (as in modern southern enunciations of *fast*) now, of course, functions as one of the primary markers of a non-localized ‘standard’, or RP, accent and, although its transformation to this salient feature of ‘talking proper’ is now seemingly secure, it is perhaps salutary to remember that this was by no means so well established in the late nineteenth century.

Of course? We shall see. Mugglestone uses [a:] to represent the ‘southern’ BATH vowel. It should be borne in mind that many accents of England, including many of those in the south, have an [a:] rather than an [a:], and that the use of [a:] as opposed to [a:] in those regions really is a sociolinguistic variable, with the back vowel having higher prestige. In the south-west the very distinction between short

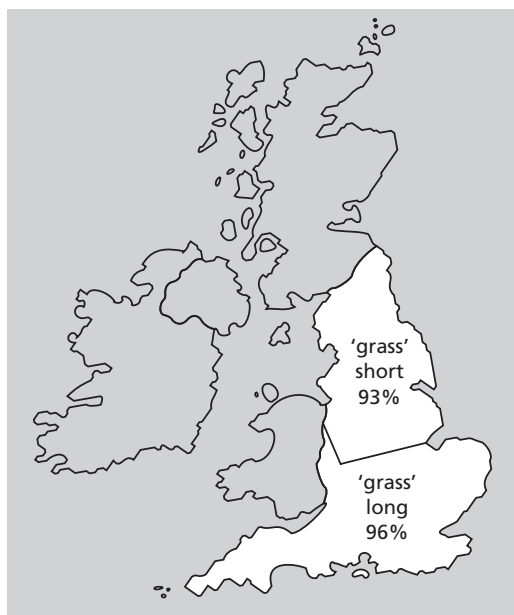


Figure 1: The long/short divide

and long vowels may be of less phonological importance than elsewhere in England (Wells II:345). It is strange that the entire north seems to be classed as non-standard by Mugglestone, while the entire south is represented by only its highest prestige variant. Mugglestone’s association of non-localized, ‘standard’, and RP is something I will return to.

The boundary between short and long vowels in SED, in the word *last*, runs roughly on the line shown in Figure 1: a line can be drawn west from The Wash, which lifts slightly further north as it comes near the Welsh border. North of the line, there are short vowels in *last*, and south of it long vowels. The division is almost perfect, with anomalous responses concentrated on a band along the line. Exactly the same pattern was found by me with very different respondents fifty years later.

Both the alumni and the students had no hesitation giving instant answers for their pronunciation of *grass*. Few indicated that they changed their pronunciation depending on social or geographical circumstances. Many of these respondents (unlike those in SED) had experienced considerable geographical mobility and not many of these claimed to have changed pronunciation as a result of the move. One of the alumni said that he had lived in London for a number of years and might sometimes use a long vowel, rather than his native short vowel. One of the students (from

**Table 2 Responses north and south of the SED line (either response on the boundary line classed as congruent)**

|                          | Short vowel | Long Vowel | %age congruent with region |
|--------------------------|-------------|------------|----------------------------|
| <b>North of SED line</b> | <b>74</b>   | <b>6</b>   | <b>93</b>                  |
| Student data             | 47          | 4          | 92                         |
| Alumni data              | 27          | 2          | 93                         |
| <b>South of SED line</b> | <b>2</b>    | <b>51</b>  | <b>96</b>                  |
| Student data             | 1           | 36         | 97                         |
| Alumni data              | 1           | 15         | 94                         |

London, living in Yorkshire) indicated alternation between the long and short vowel in *grass*, presumably as a result of a move to the north. There are a few individuals who will accommodate to the pattern of a new region after relocation. But there was no indication whatsoever that any respondent away from the border zone (such as a respondent from Loughborough) varied the vowel according to social context, as would be the case if this was indeed a sociolinguistic variable in the Labovian sense of showing patterned stylistic and social variation (Labov 1970). The elicitation of the terms from both students and alumni was one which should have promoted the supply of a high number of self-conscious, high-prestige variants, and these respondents (unlike those of the SED) were from high social classes.

The distribution of long and short vowels in the BATH lexical set is astonishingly consistent over time (Table 2). With one exception, the most southerly students to claim a short vowel in *grass* were from Northampton and Bedfordshire, and (again with one exception) the most southerly alumnus to claim a short vowel was from Wolverhampton. It was apparent from the students that respondents on or near the line (such as from Birmingham) varied. The overall pattern of distribution in England (Figure 1) is the same as that identified by the Survey of English dialects, using data from people born about a century earlier than the current respondents (Orton *et al.* 1978: Ph 4). One student from Essex unexpectedly had the short vowel in *grass*, despite commenting that the short vowel was characteristic of the north and midlands. The interviewer did not comment on this anomaly – there may be an error. In 2004,

one respondent from Bristol indicated that he used the short vowel in *grass*. Bristol lies in the south-western area where the treatment of long and short vowels is unusual for England. This respondent indicated that he did not want to sound ‘rustic’ (the impression presumably that would be given by [a:]), and that his choice of the short rather than long vowel might have been under the influence of his northern parents.

Comments recorded by the students indicate that many people are aware of the geographical distribution of this feature. Forty-eight respondents made comments that clearly indicated they knew of this as a northern/southern shibboleth. One respondent (from Leamington Spa) associated the southern variant with older speakers and the northern variant with younger ones. Leamington Spa is right on the boundary, and thus an area where socially meaningful patterns might be found: in these areas it would be interesting to establish whether the direction of change is to the northern or southern form. Eight members of the student group made comments relating to correctness, three from the north of England (Boston, Doncaster, Preston) identifying the short vowel as correct, one suggesting that the long vowel was wrong because there is ‘no r in it’ (a reference to the use of [ɑ:] in the START lexical set, where historically the vowel was lengthened in accents of England due to the loss of /r/).

Four students (one each from Reading and Leicester and two from Cambridge) indicated that the long vowel was ‘correct’, ‘better English’, or ‘well-spoken’. And one diplomatic Londoner expressly said that both were correct. Nineteen respondents indicated that having a

long vowel in *grass* is more prestigious than the short vowel (but 10 of those did not mention the regional distribution at all). However, being ‘posh’ is not a positive thing for some of these respondents. Many of the northerners were noticeably hostile to /grɑ:s/, describing it as ‘comical’, ‘snobbish’, ‘pompous’ or even ‘for morons’.

There are only six anomalous long vowel users north of the line (one each from Preston, Manchester, Yorkshire, and Hexham, and two from Cheshire, which is close to the border for this variable). There are undoubtedly a few high prestige speakers from the north of England who use a traditional variety of RP, but they are few. For these individuals, the allocation of the lexical set BATH to a long or short vowel might be a sociolinguistic variable, but they are very few indeed.

The treatment of words in the core BATH set, such as *grass*, is an excellent regional marker. Most English respondents associate the variation with the North and South of England. Though some have strong preferences for one or another alternative, a relatively neutral regional identification is the most common reaction. There is no justification for the claims by Wells and Mugglestone that this is a sociolinguistic variable in the north, though it is a sociolinguistic variable in the areas on the border (as shown by Heath 1980), and the variation between [ɑ:] and [ɑ:] is a sociolinguistic variable in many locations of both north and south. It has been suggested (e.g. Mees 1987, Trudgill 1988, Kerswill & Williams 2002) that London accents are a major influence around the country. I see no evidence that London is spreading north in the BATH lexical set.

Most of those who describe and codify RP allocate this lexical set to the long vowel (such as Wells 1990, *OED*, though Upton *et al.* 2001 operate with a definition of RP that allows for a short vowel). However there are many northerners whose vowel quality matches conventional descriptions of RP, but who have a short vowel in this lexical set. It may be because of this trivial difference between northern RP and southern RP that some linguists have started to use the (slightly offensive) term ‘Southern Standard British English’ rather than using just ‘RP’, which implies an accent that is non-regional within England. But to me it seems that it would be strange not to use the label *RP* for accents like this, simply because of the allocation of a small set of words.

## Words for *stream*

At an international level, words for ‘stream’ are well known heteronyms (Görlach 1990, Gupta 2001). Within England, the distribution of words for ‘stream’ (or ‘rivulet’ as it is called in the SED reports) is more complex than the distribution of long and short vowels in *grass* (Upton *et al.* 1994). There are more alternatives, and geographical factors enter into play: there are, for example, considerable physical differences between waterways in low-lying Norfolk (where there is a lot of drained land) and mountainous Cumberland. Nevertheless, in SED a general pattern emerges: of *burn* in the far north, *beck* in the rest of the north, and *brook* over a wide area of the Midlands and the south. There are several other words of local occurrence and some respondents who have no word other than *stream*.

Once again, a similar distribution was found from the Leeds respondents (Figure 2). With the exception of one respondent, describing herself as coming from ‘north west London’ (who gave her word as *wadi*, presumably reflecting a South Asian association), the student respondents supplied only *beck* and *brook*, congruent with their location. The alumni day respondents added *burn*, from two respondents further north, and *rhine*, from two respondents from Somerset. The methodology used with the students did not discourage



Figure 2 Words for ‘stream’

*stream*, and 23 respondents, from all regions, supplied only *stream*. In the alumni-day study, where subjects were invited to give alternatives to *stream*, 7 respondents from London and 2 from York said they knew only *stream*.

Respondents had less clear-cut answers on this variable than on the *grass* variable. The alumni often had to think about their responses, sometimes quoting place-name evidence, and they volunteered a great deal of additional information, indicating that many of them had acquired new words for streams as they moved around the country (or world). Older subjects are likely to have experienced greater personal mobility, and (as in this case) may have acquired regional words from several places. Although the student respondents all had the experience of living in Leeds, none of those from other regions suggested *beck*, and their residence there as students seems to have made little lexical impact: they behaved much more like the SED respondents who had always lived in the same place. The responses from the older respondents showed an expectation that a stream was likely to be named in a way congruent with, not one's own origins, but the location of the stream. There was no evidence of this kind of adaptation being routinely made in the case of *grass*. It is not clear whether the difference in this respect between the younger and older respondents reflects a real change (the dominance of *stream*): it is possible that the younger respondents will learn that streams have regional names later in life, when they live in a place with more contact with residents than they do as students.

Regional words appear in place names, and are all candidates for local standards – the words offered here all have entries in the *OED* indicating their status as local regional words (including *wadi* and *rhine*), and all are routinely used in texts such as local newspapers. A Greek student respondent, who supplied 'stream, beck, brook, channel, rivulet' illustrated rather nicely how speakers of English need to learn a variety of words, some of them regional: *creek* would have been a useful addition to her list, especially outside the British Isles. These local words for 'stream' are not restricted to those native to a region, with accents from the region, but are to be used by all those referring to the physical feature in the region. Whereas moving the pronunciation of *grass* from one lexical set to another is seen as

changing a badge of identity, the same speaker is able to use *rhine* in Somerset and *beck* in Leeds without any sense of betrayal of her roots. It is as if the term is associated with the terrain, just as in world Englishes words are associated with specific cultural institutions. Of all aspects of language the lexicon is the most permeable.

## Conclusion

These two linguistic variables operate at a high level of consciousness. Both are stable over time, and carry geographical rather than social meaning. The choice of a word for 'stream' is conditioned in part by a speaker's region of origin, such that terms like *burn*, *brook* and *beck* will be applied to the physical feature wherever it is seen, but these are terms with a localised standard usage, and speakers regularly acquire and use new heteronyms when they relocate, adding them to a repertoire of geographically specialised words. The allocation of a group of words in a small lexical set to either a long or a short vowel is an important marker of northern and southern identity within England. For some speakers, the use of a short vowel in this lexical set may be the only phonological mark of a northern identity. Few speakers allocate this lexical set in a way that is not characteristic of their region of origin. North of a narrow border zone, where the use of a long vowel may be more prestigious, there is no evidence that this functions as a sociolinguistic variable: speakers are not more likely to use a long vowel in more formal styles.

In sociolinguistic research it is sometimes forgotten that not all linguistic variables are sociolinguistic variables. Within England, it is reasonable to identify RP as a high-prestige accent in most locations, and this has worked helpfully in much sociolinguistic research. But the use of RP as a default high-prestige variety should not preclude the identification of regional variants of RP. The social should not be confused with the regional. It is not helpful to equate RP with accents of southern England, nor to equate southern accents with a 'standard' accent. Just as there are local high prestige accents and local standard lexical items in Englishes outside England, there are features of English accents which are geographical rather than social, and there are local standard lexical items. ■

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