

## Book Review

**Hickey, Raymond (ed.). 2017.** *Listening to the Past. Audio Records of Accents of English* (Studies in English Language). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781107051577 (hardback), xxii, 574 pp. £95.00.

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I am very glad that this book exists. As someone who is interested in all aspects of the phonological history of English, I find it a delight to see so much that is new and appetite-whetting gathered together in one volume, especially given that most of the chapters are discussing varieties that are far from the standard forms of English that have often been (understandably but frustratingly) the focus of much historical research. We know a lot about the history of English, but we know astonishingly little about the history of most varieties, and while parts of their history may be lost to us due to a dearth of records, this volume shows how – using a specific set of quite new methods – we can yet hope to understand aspects of the changes that happened in their (Late Modern) history and of the variation that accompanied them. For some of the varieties considered here (for example, Liverpool English, Ghanaian English, New Zealand English) this involves investigating aspects of the very emergence of the varieties as they were formed through the coming together of speakers of different dialects in ‘new-dialect formation’ scenarios. In other cases (for example, West Yorkshire English, Irish English, New England English), it involves working with longer established varieties to figure out when a feature that now exists was innovated, or how it patterned in earlier stages, or even to discover features that no longer exist. There is also still much to discover about the history of standard-like varieties (for example, RP), of course, and this volume also shows how we can do that, too. The methods that form the point of the book, unifying all the investigations that it includes, are the ways of investigating ‘found corpora’ of early recordings of varieties that have begun to be pursued only quite recently. While such recordings have, by their very nature, existed for decades (in some cases over a century), they have largely been gathering dust in archives or other storage spaces until now.

The final chapter in the volume, by the editor, describes ‘The Development of Recording Technology’ and sets out the history of recorded sound, from the 1877 invention of the phonograph onwards. It also says something (as does the introductory ‘Analysing Early Audio Recordings’, also by the editor), about the history of using recording technology for dialectological purposes – making

recordings of non-standard varieties specifically in order to present or preserve data for analysis. The earliest such recordings for English discussed in the volume date from 1916, when Wilhelm Doegen began a programme to collect samples of varieties of English from prisoners of war held in Germany, and several chapters in the book discuss data from these recordings (from West Yorkshire, the Scottish Central Belt and Tyneside). Many more focused later dialectological projects have also left recordings, as have individual scholars interested in particular varieties, and these are also used in several chapters (for example, the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* collected recordings in the 1930s, as did the *Survey of English Dialects* in England largely in the 1950s, David DeCamp in Jamaica in the 1950s, and the *Dictionary of American Regional English* in the 1960s). It is not just corpora of dialectological material that are useful in this enterprise, however. Several chapters use early recordings made by broadcasters (for example, by the British, Canadian and South African Broadcasting Corporations, the New Zealand Broadcasting Service, and by fore-runners of Radió Teilifís Éireann and the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation) or by oral history projects or folklorist or ethnographic collectors (for example, chapters discuss such material for Liverpool, California, Canada and Tristan da Cunha, and one considers how ‘ex-slave recordings’ made by a number of different types of researchers can be testaments for the development of African American English).

While it is clear from the dates of this kind of material that it can push our knowledge of the history of the varieties back beyond the material published since the explosion of sociolinguistic investigation in the later part of the twentieth century, the nature of the people who were recorded can push things back even further. Given that dialectological investigations typically sought out elderly speakers (on the assumption that they would ‘preserve’ the oldest forms), such people acquired their variety long before they were recorded. As long as we accept the ‘apparent time’ reasoning of much of sociolinguistics, which has stood up quite well to investigations of life-span change (e.g. Sankoff and Blondeau 2007), then we can agree that “examining the speech of an octogenarian recorded in the 1960s opens a window on linguistic patterns in the late nineteenth century,” as Gordon and Strelluf write in their chapter (p. 234). In theirs, Cox and Palethorpe call the approach “phonetic archaeology” (p. 524). Many of the chapters thus push back our knowledge of the varieties in question to a point in the mid-to-late nineteenth century – a point which for many of them is otherwise investigable only on the basis of the comparative method or by inference from assumptions about new-dialect formation, which will naturally leave lots of details (especially concerning the chronology of changes or their sociolinguistic patterning) undiscoverable.

It is not the case that *no* previous linguistic work has been done with such recordings. For example, several non-phonological aspects of ‘ex-slave recordings’ have been investigated before (see, for instance, Bailey et al. 1991), and Schreier and Trudgill (2006) made use of both BBC recordings and earlier ethnographically-collected material. Most notably, the *Origins of New Zealand English* project (see, for example, Gordon et al. 2004; Trudgill 2004, as well as the chapter by Sóskuthy, Hay, Maclagan, Drager and Foulkes in this volume) blazed the trail that this volume is following, showing how a found corpus of oral history recordings made in the 1940s (of speakers born between 1851 and 1904) can be used to shed real light on the development and history of a variety. The work gathered in this volume extends this approach to a wide range of varieties of English (namely island varieties from the Caribbean and Tristan da Cunha, and varieties from Europe, North America, Africa and Australasia).

Naturally, the kind of materials used in the volume do not offer us ideal data for all the questions that we might want to ask. The introduction and chapters are honest about many of the shortcomings of the approach: many social groups were not recorded (much early dialectology focused on rural males, much early recording by broadcasters preserves only ‘prominent’ ruling-class speakers), the earliest recordings are often short and imperfect (because of the technology available at the time), and some of the recordings are considerably affected by the unfamiliarity of being recorded. We can also add that, because the material contained here is all working with corpora (sometimes quite small ones), it is constrained by the general limitations of such work: it cannot show that a feature was *not* present in a variety at a particular time if it was subject to variation, and it will often not be possible to probe any subtle patterning of a phonological phenomenon (as words with the required phonological environments might not occur). Nonetheless, found corpora of the kind used in this volume are the best that we have got, and the chapters collected here show that much can be discovered from them, including by the methods of acoustic phonetics (a common thread through the chapters) despite the age of the recordings and the non-modern technology used to record them.

The fact that the chapters are brought together because they all use the same type of methodology means that the book should also be of interest to those who do not work with English – the kind of work that it considers can surely also be done for many other languages, and the kinds of questions considered here show what can be done. Furthermore, although all the chapters are considering phonological or phonetic issues, the kinds of materials discussed here could also be of interest to those working on other aspects of language, such as lexis, morpho-syntax and discourse.

It would not be possible to describe the triumphs or shortcomings of each of the 23 chapters (or even their contents) in this short review, but readers will likely be interested to know which varieties are covered (and who by). This is largely clear from the chapters' titles, as follows. West Yorkshire varieties are considered by Robinson ('British Library Sound Recordings of Vernacular Speech: They Were Lost and Now They Are Found'); RP by Fabricius ('Twentieth-Century Received Pronunciation: Prevocalic /r/') and Hickey ('Twentieth-Century Received Pronunciation: Stop Articulation'); Kerswill and Torgersen discuss 'London's Cockney in the Twentieth Century: Stability or Cycles of Contact-Driven Change?'; Watson and Clark 'The Origins of Liverpool English'; Watt and Foulkes 'Tyneside English'; Stuart-Smith and Lawson 'Scotland: Glasgow and the Central Belt'; Hickey 'Early Recordings of Irish English'; Gordon and Strelluf 'Evidence of American Regional Dialects in Early Recordings'; Johnson and Durian 'New England'; Purnell, Raimy and Salmons 'Upper Midwestern English'; Fridland and Kendall 'Western United States'; Thomas 'Analysis of the Ex-Slave Recordings'; Boberg 'Archival Data on Earlier Canadian English'; Clarke, De Decker and Van Herk 'Canadian Raising in Newfoundland? Insights from Early Vernacular Recordings'; Gooden and Drayton 'The Caribbean: Trinidad and Jamaica'; Huber 'Early Recordings from Ghana: A Variationist Approach to the Phonological History of an Outer Circle Variety'; Bekker 'Earlier South African English'; Schreier 'Early Twentieth-Century Tristan da Cunha h'English'; Cox and Palethorpe 'Open Vowels in Historical Australian English'; and Sóskuthy, Hay, Maclagan, Drager and Foulkes 'Early New Zealand English: The Closing Diphthongs'. There are naturally certain claims and analytical decisions in some chapters that a reader might disagree with, but overall the quality of the individual chapters is very high and the editor is to be congratulated on bringing them all together, covering so many different parts of the English-speaking world.

Some chapters are relatively short, largely illustrating the possibilities of the data they discuss or giving a few preliminary (but still noteworthy) results, while others consider issues in detail, arguing substantial points. To give a flavour of the results in the volume: several chapters show that features which have been presumed or proposed to be quite new (in other work on the varieties) are in fact quite old (for example, derhoticisation of coda-*r* in the Central Belt of Scotland, Canadian Raising in Newfoundland, front realisations of the NURSE vowel and low realisations of STRUT in Ghana); others confirm that features which previous work has claimed must have been present in earlier stages of a variety (or else a particular account of their history would not work) were indeed there (for example, a [r] realisation of /r/ in West Yorkshire, spirantised realisations of stops in Liverpool and Irish English), or that features predicted by a particular

analysis *not* to be present at an early point were in fact there (for example, the ‘KIT-Split’ in South Africa, ‘Canadian Raising’ in New Zealand); others show that there was considerable variation in a variety in its earliest recorded forms, as is predicted in theoretical models of new-dialect formation (for example, in Upper Midwestern English, and likely in the Western United States); still others show that precursors of contemporary features were present in late nineteenth-century speech (for example, intonational patterns in African American English), or that versions of a contemporary feature were previously found in a more widespread area than currently (for example, split short-*a* systems in New England); some chapters confirm ideas about the history of varieties gained from other materials (published results of dialectological surveys, the investigation of variation in contemporary speech), and some will force a revision of these ideas.

After explaining some of the problems in using early recordings, including the fragility of many of them due to the materials they are made on, Fridland and Kendall in their chapter

urge researchers to look locally toward the preservation of these rich resources and to use any additional funds they have to digitize at least small parts of local collections, or else much of our rich linguistic heritage will be forever lost. (p. 332)

This is heartily to be echoed, and we should also be encouraged to search for other such (potential) corpora of materials – there must be many waiting to be discovered. It is a joy to see so much material of this type being used to answer questions in historical phonology in this volume, and while this approach cannot replace other (more theoretical or deductive) work on the history of the varieties (because of its limitations, discussed above), it is a crucial addition to our methods.

## References

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