

# Word Frequency Effects in Lexical Diffusion: A Cue to the Origins of Sound Change?

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Research carried out in recent decades has revealed a complex relationship between word frequency and sound change, some types of change affecting high-frequency words first, some affecting low-frequency words first (Phillips 2006; Bybee 2007).

Since different types of change seem to affect either high- or low-frequency words first, the pattern of spread of an innovative pronunciation across the lexicon may help us identify the original cause of the change. As Joan Bybee has suggested, ‘lexical diffusion patterns can provide an additional and much-needed criterion for discovering both why and how sound changes take place’ (2001: 83).

In this paper, I will explore this notion further by looking at the preliminary results of a frequency investigation of TH-fronting in Glaswegian English, a change that has also been observed in many other accents of English (e.g. Kerswill 2003). The question of what caused this change in the first place has occupied linguists for some time, and at least three different explanations have been put forward to account for its emergence: 1) it is a borrowed feature; 2) it is a perceptually based change; and 3) it is somehow ‘natural’.

As I will show, models such as Bybee’s (2001) exemplar theory make different predictions for frequency effects for each scenario, meaning that any frequency effect associated with TH-fronting could conceivably further our understanding of why this change occurred in the first place.

## References

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