

Selective accent revival in Liverpool¹

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Abstract

Despite the considerable stigma attached to it, many people in Liverpool have the impression that Scouse, the local accent, is getting stronger. This paper reports an apparent time study investigating whether young Liverpoolians use local variants of two consonantal variables (/ŋ(g)/ and lenition of /k/) more than older speakers and whether increased usage can be linked to decreasing salience. The data suggest that younger speakers are only “more Scouse” with respect to /k/, the variable that is part of the stereotype of the accent. The salience of this feature is actually increasing, so a very strong desire to express a local identity is a more probable cause for the change.

1 Introduction

Like many other Northern English cities, Liverpool experienced quite dramatic economic and social change during the second half of the 20th century. While the city was considered by some the “global capital” of pop culture (being the home of the Beatles) in the 1960s, Liverpool fell on hard times in the following two decades and became associated primarily with unemployment, poverty, and crime (see Belchem 2006a). Partly as a result of this, Scouse – as the local accent is called – is both widely known in the United Kingdom (cf. Trudgill 1999: 70) and highly stigmatised (cf. Montgomery 2007: 194 and 254). In light of wide spread dialect levelling found in Britain (cf. Kerswill 2003: 236) and elsewhere, and helped by the stigmatisation of the accent, it would not be too surprising to see Scouse level out and become more similar to the standard or the surrounding non-standard varieties. From the middle of the 1990s onwards, however, both economic conditions and the national image of the city have been improving to a certain degree, as Liverpool has started to focus on (local) culture and tourism. Belchem (2006b: xii) sees “forward-looking self-promotion” now prevailing in Liverpool.

Against this backdrop, many Liverpoolians have the impression that the accent is actually getting *stronger* among younger people. Watson (2007a: 237) investigated the use of a number of variables and found some evidence supporting this claim, concluding that Scouse seems to be “getting Scouser”. This paper presents additional data concerning two phonological variables of Scouse (one of which was not analysed by Watson 2007a) and furthermore investigates the question of whether younger speakers of Scouse use local variants more – if indeed they do – because they are less aware of their localness, i.e. because the salience of the variables is lower for younger speakers than for their parents’ or grandparents’ generation. I will first give a brief description of the two consonantal variables under scrutiny here.

¹ Analysis of the data is ongoing, so all results and conclusions are preliminary. A final and more comprehensive version of this paper will be included in Juskan (in preparation). The findings of this study were presented at the 21st LIPP-Symposium in Munich and at an internal workshop at the University of Freiburg. I am very grateful for the comments received on these occasions. All remaining shortcomings are entirely mine.

1.1 Variables

1.1.1 “Velar nasal plus”

One of the features present in Scouse is what Trudgill (1999: 58) calls “velar nasal plus”. Most varieties of English pronounce <ng> clusters as /ŋ/. The original realisation (as “reflected in the spelling which we still use”; Trudgill 1999: 58), however, was /ŋg/. This older pronunciation prevails to this day in an area that contains the cities Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool. In these places, *singer* is not pronounced /sɪŋə/ but /sɪŋgə/, and *long* is realised as /lɒŋg/ instead of /lɒŋ/ (cf. Trudgill 1999: 58).

Talking about Scouse in particular, Knowles (1973: 293) suggests that /g/ is primarily realised word-finally or prevocally, and that /ŋg/ “would be odd” preceding another plosive such as in *stringed*. The *ing*-forms can also be realised with an audible /g/, resulting in /ɪŋg/. According to Knowles (1973: 293), “[r]eduplicated /ɪŋg/-forms as in *singing* /sɪŋgɪŋg/” are possible, but comparatively rare. This is probably due mostly to the fact that, just as in many other places of the English-speaking world, *-ing* is often realised as /ɪn/ in Liverpool. Interestingly, Knowles reports that in the (mostly middle class) district of Aighburth, the majority of the men he interviewed used /ŋ/, whereas most women used /ŋg/ (cf. Knowles 1973: 295). Watson (2007b: 352) also reports velar nasal plus – including reduplicated instances as in *singing* /sɪŋgɪŋg/ – as a characteristic of Liverpool English (his data are taken from the speech of a 21-year-old), so apparently it is not a feature that has disappeared since the 1970s when Knowles published his thesis.

In the literature, velar nasal plus is not counted among the more salient features of Scouse.

1.1.2 Lenition of /k/

The technical term “lenition”, from Latin *lenis*, describes a process of phonological “weakening” along a certain trajectory. For the purposes of this study, I will adhere to Honeybone’s (2007: 129) definition as a “synchronic, variable process whereby underlying plosives are realised as affricates and fricatives in certain specific prosodic and melodic environments”. He counts this process among “the clearest phonological characteristics of Modern Liverpool English” and also provides a detailed account of its history.

All plosives can be subject to lenition in Liverpool English (cf. Honeybone 2001: 236), but this paper will focus exclusively on /k/. A lenited /k/ in Scouse is either realised as an affricate [kx], or as one of the two fricatives [x] and [ç], which are in complementary distribution for most speakers and phonologically conditioned: [ç] follows high front monophthongs and raising diphthongs (*week* [wi:ç], *like* [laɪç]), whereas velar (or uvular) fricatives occur in the remaining contexts (*back* [bæx], *dock* [dɒx], cf. Watson 2007b: 353). Based on his 1973 data, Knowles (1973: 325-327) found that the majority of Liverpoolians used “stops with incomplete closure” at least every now and then and many apparently even realised lenited stops in rather formal speaking styles. He therefore concludes that lenition, though originally probably a working class feature, has also taken hold in middle class speech. He nevertheless finds that – not surprisingly – lenited variants are more frequent in working class speech. The frequency of the individual variants depends mostly on the phonological environment, with, for instance, the fricatives being most frequent in “word-final and foot-medial positions”, while other contexts are inhibitive to the use of lenited variants (cf. Honeybone 2007: 130; for a discussion of inhibiting environments see Honeybone 2001). This study focusses on the two contexts that seem to favour lenition of /k/: most: word-final and in between vowels.

Honeybone (2007: 130) explains that the Scouse form of lenition is not only special in its precise patterning, but also “unique among varieties of English in its extent”. This is certainly one of the main reasons for the reported high social salience of the feature and its being part of the Scouse stereotype.

2 Method

2.1 Interview structure and participants

Production data were obtained in the form of “classical” sociolinguistic interviews. All of these interviews were one-on-one and conducted by the author. The interviews consisted of a free speech section where subjects were asked a number of questions about the area of the city they grew up in, changes in the city, football and other sports, Liverpool’s image in the UK, the rivalry with Manchester, and a number of identity labels. Towards the end of the interview, participants read out a reading passage and a list of keywords. Next, subjects were asked to read out the reading passage a second time using their strongest Scouse accent. Finally, subjects were asked a number of questions concerning Scouse, notably whether they thought the accent had changed in their life time and what features they considered most typical. In total, the interviews lasted between 50 and 60 minutes.

Participants were recruited with the help of notes in pubs, cafés, football grounds, community centres, etc., email calls for participants through Hope University and the University of Liverpool mailing lists, word-of-mouth advertising and by approaching people in person. Subjects were offered £10 for their time. No selection of participants in terms of ‘typicality’ or ‘strength of accent’ was made (see, e.g., the ‘new NORMs’ in Honeybone 2001).

This study is based on data from 18 subjects from different parts of Liverpool, who provided a total of 6482 tokens (2883 for velar nasal plus, 3599 for /k/). All participants were born and/or had grown up in the Liverpool Urban Area since age 12 or younger and had spent the majority of their lives in the city. A rough socio-economic distinction into working class and middle class was made. English was the first and only language for all subjects. People were classified as belonging to one of three age groups (19-29, 30-55, and 56-85). All participants were White British.

Table 1: Age, gender, and class of participants

	19-29		30-55		56-85	
	female	male	female	male	female	male
working class	2	2	1	2	1	1
middle class	2	2	1	2	1	1

2.2 Measurement

The method for acoustically measuring /k/ was heavily inspired by the one used in Sangster (2001) to investigate lenition of alveolar stops. Phonetic plosives have a period of silence, or closure, followed by a burst and friction. For affricates, there is the same silence, but obviously more friction than for plosives, and fricatives have either a very short period of silence or none at all and consist (almost) entirely of friction.

Both the closure and friction phases were marked in a Praat TextGrid for every released /k/. A script was then used to automatically measure the duration of these segments. Next, what Sangster (2001: 405-407) calls “the proportional duration of friction” (PDF) was calculated by dividing the duration of the friction phase by the duration of silence plus friction. The result is a figure between 0 (or 0 %) and 1 (100 %), with lower values for more plosive-like realisations and higher values for sounds that are, phonetically speaking, affricates or fricatives. The same technique was applied to /ŋ(g)/. The standard realisation as a nasal [ŋ] involves complete oral closure – just as with [k] – and for the typical Scouse realisation as [ŋg] this closure phase is followed by a release burst and friction. While the

PDF of [ŋg] will never be as high as that of a /k/ realised as a fricative, the PDF values will mean the same thing for velar nasal plus as they do for /k/: lower values (no or little friction; [ŋ]) indicate a standard-like realisation, and higher scores (presence of friction; [ŋg]) mark non-standard, Scouse variants. Both variables were measured in two environments: in-between vowels and at the end of words.

2.3 Saliency

The notion of saliency is notoriously vague and operationalised in a number of different ways in linguistic studies (see Kerswill/Williams 2002 for a comprehensive review). This paper has no intention of partaking in this discussion but will instead follow the traditional, Labovian approach of classifying sociolinguistic variables into indicators, markers, and stereotypes (see Labov 1972). A variable will be considered a highly salient stereotype if speakers style-shift (i.e. use the non-standard variant significantly less in more formal contexts) and explicitly comment on it. If style-shifting is present but explicit commentary is lacking, the feature is classified as a (less salient) marker. If speakers do not style-shift at all, the variable is taken to be a non-salient indicator.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Velar nasal plus

After [ɪn]-realisations (which are obviously only possible for *ing*-forms) – but not [ŋ] or [ŋg] realisations in *ing*-forms – had been removed from the data set, a mixed linear effects model was fit to the remaining tokens. Since proper frequency data had not been available at the time of writing, the carrier word in which the /ŋ(g)/ tokens occurred was used as the best available equivalent and entered as a random factor. The final model is represented below:

Table 2: Mixed linear effects model for /ŋ(g)/

Random effects:

Groups	Name	Variance	Std.Dev.
Word	(Intercept)	15.39	3.923
Residual		98.90	9.945

Number of obs: 1543, groups: Word, 179

Fixed effects:

	Estimate	Std. Error	df	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	9.6837	0.6464	73.5000	14.980	< 2e-16 ***
Style1	2.6939	0.8898	362.7000	3.027	0.00264 **
Style2	0.1669	0.6235	1233.3000	0.268	0.78904
Style3	-2.4159	0.5871	338.2000	-4.115	4.87e-05 ***
Age_grp1	-2.2725	0.4058	1518.0000	-5.600	2.53e-08 ***
Age_grp2	2.4961	0.3929	1510.9000	6.353	2.78e-10 ***
Gender1	0.8785	0.2726	1498.1000	3.223	0.00129 **

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1

No significant interactions could be found, and neither social class nor position (word-medially or -finally) of /ŋ(g)/ turned out to be significant predictors of PDF. Both style and age group, however, do turn out to be (highly) significant. Figure 1 illustrates the differences along the age dimension. In this and all boxplots that will follow, the red dots mark the mean values of each age group. The p-values in the figures are the result of t-tests comparing (from left to right) the old to the middle group, the old to the young, and the middle to the young group respectively.

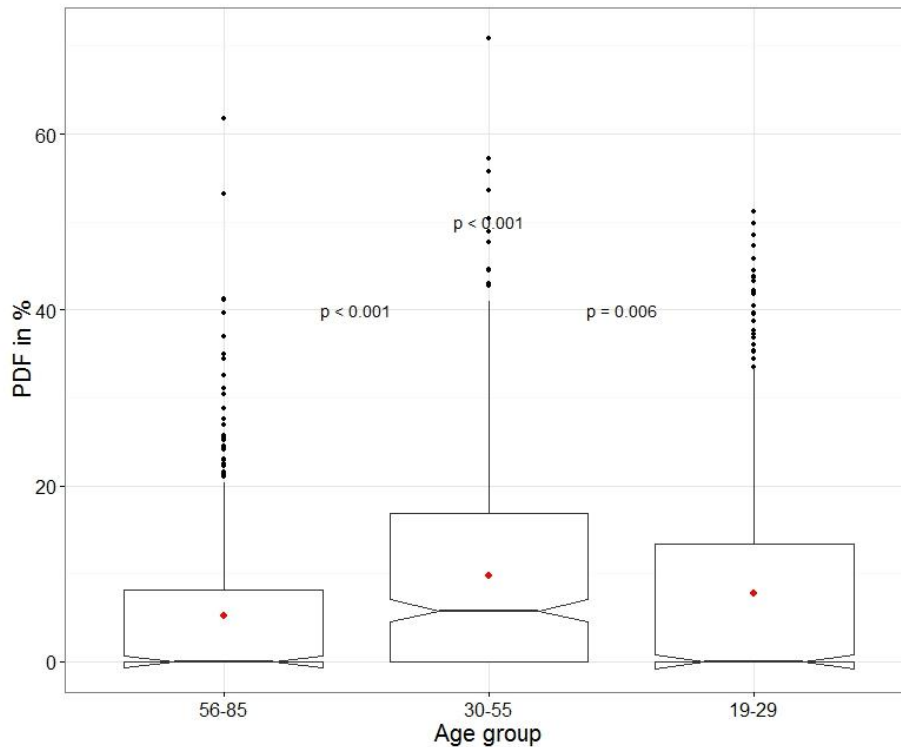


Figure 1: PDF of /ŋ(g)/ by age group

The relatively high number of outliers in all groups shows that at least occasionally all speakers use variants of /ŋ(g)/ that are clearly Scouse. The overall rather low figures (the upper boundaries of all boxes are below 20 %) are not really surprising, given the fact that even if a plosive is realised it is preceded by a nasal, so the aspiration phase will almost always be comparatively short in relation to the total duration. It is furthermore obvious that things are not as expected. The oldest speakers (age group 1 in the mixed linear effects model) are the least Scouse with respect to velar nasal plus, and they are also more homogeneous as a group than the other two. Their average PDF is only 5.26 %, while that of the middle group is, at 9.7 %, almost twice as high. From the middle to the young group, however, there is actually a significant *decrease* in PDF to 7.77 %. This means that younger Liverpoolians are not getting “more Scouse” with respect to velar nasal plus, but rather they seem to be reversing the trend begun by the middle group of speakers.

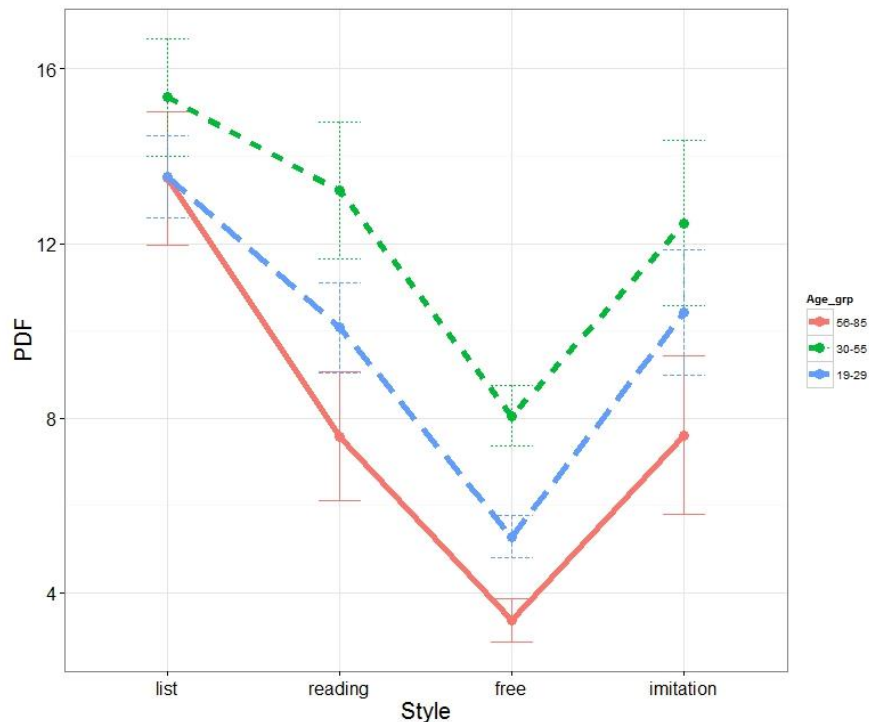


Figure 2: PDF of /ŋg/ by age and style

When we look at the style dimension (figure 2) we find something interesting going on. Not only is there a very clear pattern, but this pattern is essentially identical for all three speaker groups investigated². The pattern we see is not prototypical Labovian style-shifting, however. If it were, use of the local variant of /ŋg/ would decrease in more formal contexts like reading a text or a word list. Instead, the data show that velar nasal plus is *more* common in those formal contexts. While the linear rise from spontaneous speech to word list reading is evidence for at least subconscious awareness, this is not awareness of velar nasal plus as a local feature of Liverpool English. Rather, it shows that speakers consider velar nasal plus a characteristic of *careful* speech. This ties in nicely with the fact that, from a purely synchronic point of view, velar nasal plus is a spelling pronunciation. Since it is present in the orthography, speakers consider realising the plosive the “proper” way to talk, while not doing so is a sign of informality. The mixed linear effects model provides further evidence for this interpretation because it shows that women have a (very slightly but nevertheless significantly) higher PDF than men (8.39 % vs. 7.25 %), similar to Knowles’ 1973 finding that women used velar nasal plus more frequently than men. These findings are only compatible with many other sociolinguistic studies if we assume that people consider velar nasal plus primarily a feature of careful speech.

If velar nasal plus is careful speech, why does its use go up when speakers are asked to perform a strong local accent? This task was designed to elicit markedly local speech and the evidence (see results for lenition of /k/) suggests it succeeded. But while the accent imitation task was intended as a hyper-informal communicative context, it was still a highly artificial one, and speakers obviously paid a lot of attention to their speech, albeit not in the traditional Labovian sense of the phrase. It is possible that the increased use of velar nasal plus during accent performance is nothing but an artefact of a setting that required subjects to focus very intensely on their pronunciation. The author of this paper considers it more likely, however, that in addition to the spelling pronunciation aspect, Liverpooldians have at least some awareness of velar nasal plus as a local feature as well. This issue deserves a much more detailed discussion but suffice it to say here that whatever awareness there is, it is definitely

² No significant gender differences could be found with respect to usage across different registers.

subconscious. Not a single subject mentioned velar nasal plus as a typical feature of Liverpool English.

In light of consistent, if somewhat difficult to interpret style-shifting, I conclude, then, that velar nasal plus is a marker for all three age groups investigated and that younger speakers neither provide evidence for decreasing salience of the feature nor do they, in fact, use the local variant more than their parents' generation.

3.2 Lenition of /k/

Just as with velar nasal plus, a mixed linear effects model was fit to the data for /k/, again including the carrier word as a random factor to neutralise any frequency effects that are not of primary interest here. Instances of unreleased /k/ were not included in the model, because these realisations are probably more phonologically than socially conditioned, meaning that, compared to the plosive-fricative continuum, speakers do not have the same degree of choice when to use this variant. Again, the final model is printed below:

Table 3: Mixed linear effects model for /k/

Random effects:

Groups	Name	Variance	Std.Dev.
Word	(Intercept)	65.54	8.095
Residual		663.04	25.750

Number of obs: 2444, groups: Word, 203

Fixed effects:

	Estimate	Std. Error	df	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	69.3750	1.3475	100.5000	51.484	< 2e-16 ***
Style1	-9.9867	2.0016	925.8000	-4.989	7.23e-07 ***
Style2	-3.0870	1.5061	1693.5000	-2.050	0.04055 *
Style3	-3.6702	1.2755	413.1000	-2.878	0.00422 **
Age_grp1	0.7218	1.1866	2323.7000	0.608	0.54305
Age_grp2	-1.7933	1.1885	2338.2000	-1.509	0.13148
Class_obj1	-8.1879	0.5837	2423.8000	-14.027	< 2e-16 ***
Gender1	-5.1204	0.5504	2409.2000	-9.303	< 2e-16 ***
Position1	-6.7475	1.0696	93.9000	6.308	9.19e-09 ***
Style1:Age_grp1	2.9988	2.4777	2299.0000	1.210	0.22628
Style2:Age_grp1	-1.8527	2.0500	2308.8000	-0.904	0.36624
Style3:Age_grp1	-3.8784	1.4479	2405.1000	-2.679	0.00744 **
Style1:Age_grp2	1.9757	2.4699	2301.0000	0.800	0.42385
Style2:Age_grp2	2.9509	1.9965	2313.2000	1.478	0.13954
Style3:Age_grp2	-2.2286	1.3891	2390.8000	-1.604	0.10877

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

If we start once more with the age dimension, the primary concern of this study, we see that the model does not list age group among the significant factors for predicting PDF (although there is a significant interaction of age and style, which will be discussed further below). The difference between the middle and the young group is not too far from a statistical trend, however, as the p-value of 0.13 indicates. Still, it seems as if, again, there was no significant difference between the three age groups. If we consider a plot of the raw data (figure 3), however, the picture changes:

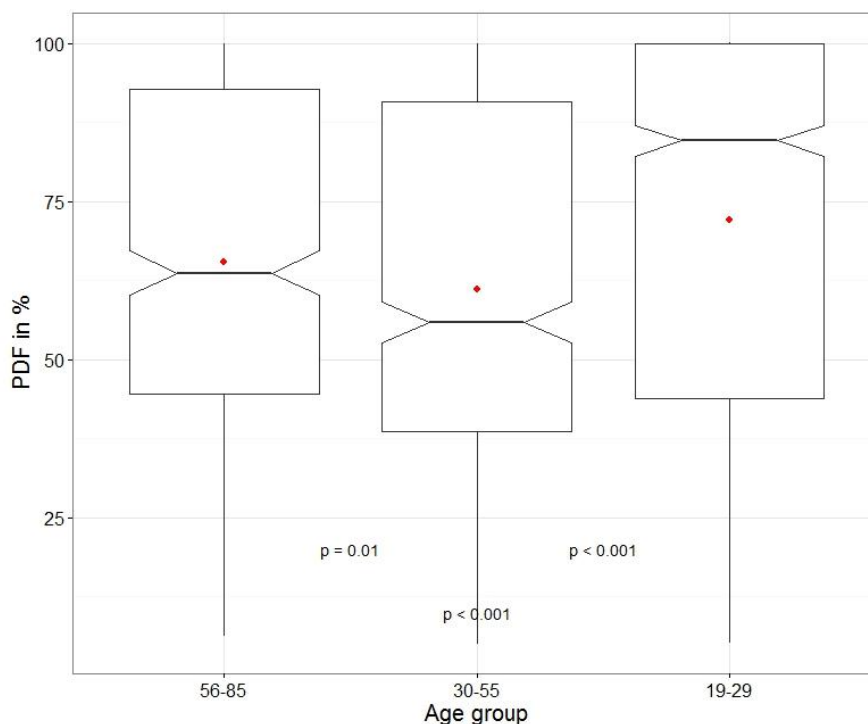


Figure 3: PDF of /k/ by age group

First of all, we can see that the upper and lower boundaries of *all* boxes are close to 40 and 90 %, respectively. This means that a) there is a lot of variance in all three groups of speakers, and b) all speakers frequently produce /k/ with quite a bit of aspiration, i.e. at least a Scouse “touch”. It can also be seen, however, that the mean (red dots) and median values (thick bars between the notches) drop from the old to the middle speakers and rise again from the middle to the young group. In contrast to the mixed effects model, t-tests with the raw data find all these differences to be (highly) significant. The cause of these incompatible results is the word *like*. Due to its role as a fashionable quotative particle, *like* is obviously much more frequent in free speech of the young group (58 % of /k/ tokens) than in the middle and old group (28 and 26 %, respectively). Young Liverpudlians in this study furthermore realise *like* with a very high average PDF of 71.85 %, which contributes considerably to their overall mean visualised in figure 3, and explains the interaction of style and age group in the mixed effects model, since it is only in free speech (“style3” in the model) that the preference of young speakers to use *like* (with a Scouse pronunciation) can fully manifest itself.

Obviously, this special behaviour of *like* in the young group was filtered out by the mixed effects model. While this makes sense in a way (it is not necessarily desirable for a single lexical item to dominate the data in such a way), it also seems somewhat unfortunate. After all, the fact that young Liverpudlians frequently say [laɪç] probably does contribute considerably to the impression that the accent is getting stronger. Furthermore, even with the effect of *like* attenuated, the difference between the middle and the young group approaches a statistical trend, and if *like* is taken out completely, the difference again becomes highly significant [$t(1135.583) = 5.25, p < 0.001$]. In light of this, I feel justified in claiming that Watson’s (2007a) finding has been corroborated and that with respect to /k/, Scouse is indeed “getting Scouser”.

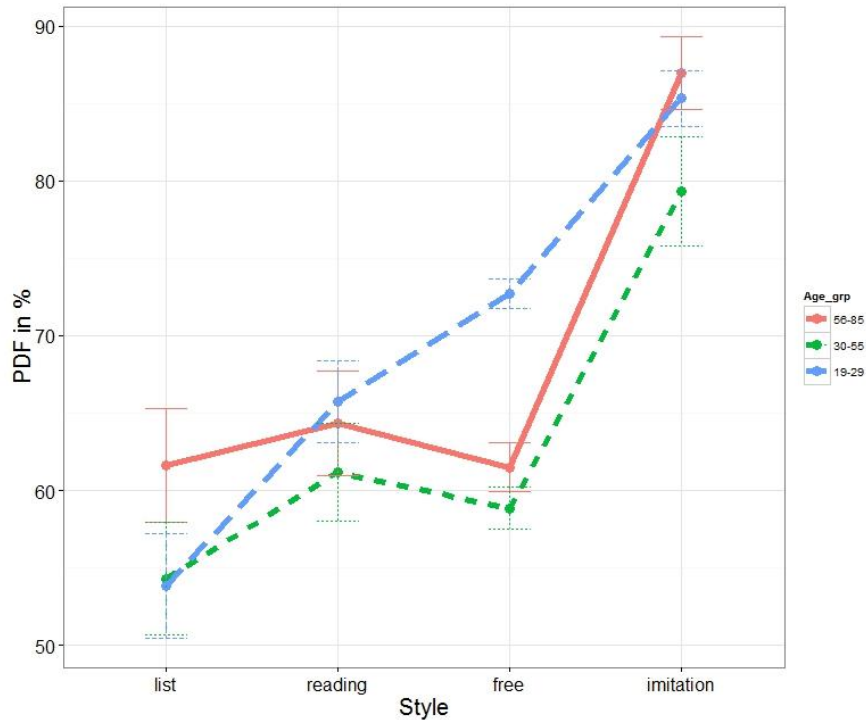


Figure 4: PDF of /k/ by age and style

Is this because lenition is a less salient feature for younger Scousers? As is evident from figure 4, the data clearly refute this hypothesis. For the oldest speakers there is virtually no style-shifting at all for the first 3 styles (word list, reading passage and free speech). Only when it comes to accent imitation can a real change be seen. The middle group already shows slightly more linear shifting and the youngest speakers, finally, provide us with a virtually perfect textbook case of Labovian style-shifting, with the average PDF of /k/ increasing in an almost straight line from most formal to most informal context. The inter-group differences suggest that for the oldest speakers, awareness of the variable is only just beginning, has started to consolidate in the middle group and reaches a state of full (though maybe still subconscious) awareness in the youngest speakers. Explicit comments made towards the end of the interview corroborate this description. Figure 5 shows that explicit knowledge of /k/-lenition, too, increases in a near-linear fashion from the oldest to the youngest participants. While only one in five subjects in the old group knows about lenition as a typical feature of Scouse, every single participant under 30 mentioned this variable and commented on it.

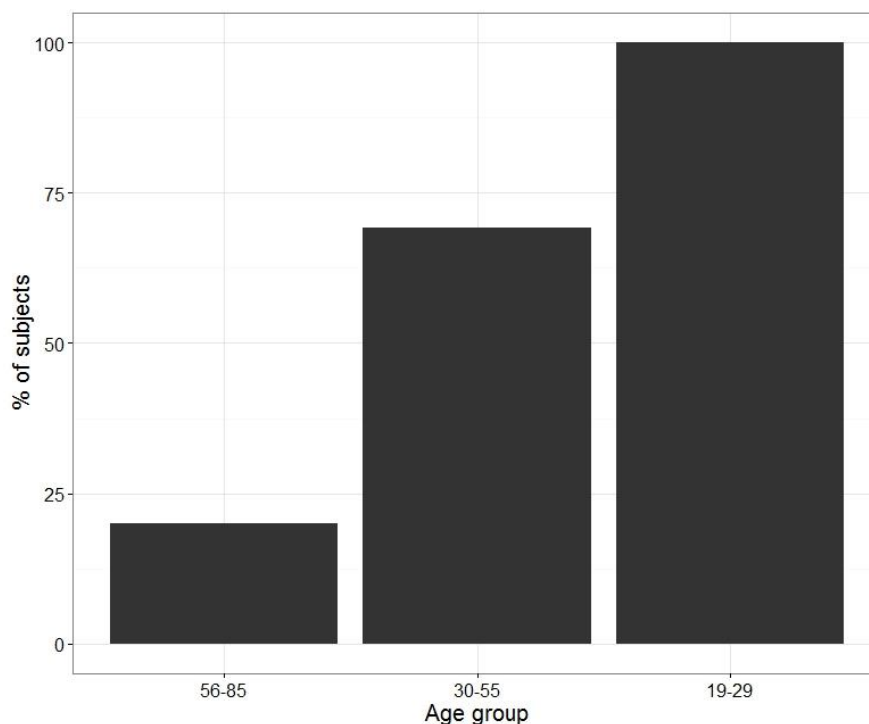


Figure 5: conscious awareness of lenition

Against this backdrop, it is not very surprising that both gender and social class should also show up as significant predictors in the linear mixed effects model. Just as would be expected for a socially highly salient variable, women (“Gender1” in the model) use less lenition than men, and middle-class (“Class_obj1” above) speakers use less lenition than working-class Liverpoolians. The fact that the phonological environment matters also ties in nicely with this. The model shows that speakers use a higher degree of lenition when /k/ occurs intervocalically (“Position1” above stands for “word-final”). This makes sense if we consider that lenition can be “justified” phonetically in this context. Vowels and plosives constitute the extremes of a continuum, because the former are produced with a virtually unobstructed vocal tract, and the latter are defined by a (temporary) complete blockage of the airstream. Realising the phonological plosive intervocalically as a fricative (produced with a narrow, but not blocked vocal tract) can therefore be seen as an (extreme) connected speech phenomenon motivated by economy. As such it might attract less social attention than in word-final position.

The data thus clearly suggest that lenition of /k/ has developed from a (beginning) marker in the old to a very solid stereotype in the young group of speakers. Why, then, do younger Liverpoolians use this feature more than their parents or grandparents despite the fact that they know about it? A different attitude towards lenition would, of course, be an option, but this is not borne out. The majority of younger and older speakers alike explained that they themselves often found very strong Scouse accents harsh, unpleasant, or intimidating. Younger Scousers in particular frequently added that lenition could render a speaker unintelligible to outsiders and that there was “no need to go [x:::] all the time” (male, working class, 19 years old). One explanation could be that many speakers just can’t help using lenition. The regular style-shifting which was found, however, rather suggests that particularly younger speakers *can* at least subconsciously control their usage of the local variant. It is also quite possible that Scousers are *generally* aware of the variable but not, for some reason, of its presence in their *own* speech. There is some anecdotal evidence in my data that supports this idea. One subject (female, working class, 20 years old) explicitly said that she didn’t like lenition and therefore didn’t use it, when in fact she has a mean PDF of 81.87 %. Finally, it is important to remember that Liverpool has changed quite dramatically in the last 20 years.

While the city is still among the most deprived in the country, the participants in the young group have only ever seen things improving a bit every year. They know about the negative image of their city and their accent, but at least to a degree they consider these attitudes to be outdated and unjustified. Pride in their city and the will to express their local identity linguistically just seem to be stronger than the stigma attached to lenition of /k/.

4 Conclusion

This paper set out to explore whether young Scousers really are “more Scouse” than older speakers and whether decreasing salience of local features could be a reason for this development. We have seen that younger Liverpoolians do not indiscriminately use *all* local features more than their parents or grandparents. Use of velar nasal plus actually *decreases* for young speakers and the salience level of this variable is equally low for all speakers investigated.

With respect to lenition of /k/, a feature that is a main component of the external Scouse stereotype, young speakers do have a more pronounced preference for local variants, despite the fact that the salience of this variable is actually *increasing*. It appears that for young Scousers the usefulness of this feature for expressing their local identity outweighs the stigma attached to it both in- and outside of Liverpool. Provided that further research looking at more variables corroborates the results arrived at in this analysis, one can say that Scouse apparently *does* experience a sort of revival, but that this revival might be restricted to features that are very salient to speakers.

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