

CHANGING NEWS: A DIACHRONIC STUDY OF SPOKEN AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH IN BROADCAST SPEECH

Abstract : If language is a marker of national identity, Australians should hear their own accent reflected in the media. This sociophonetic study examines the movement away from the Received Pronunciation (RP) / 'Cultivated' Australian norm of the 1930s. A real time analysis, using re-recordings of news broadcast material going back to 1951, was carried out on the speech of 22 male and female newsreaders. Auditory impressions of gradual change towards the 'General' Australian accent were confirmed using acoustic analysis. Results of a pilot study reveal clear changes to the monophthongal vowel space, away from an RP/Cultivated Australian norm in the direction of those reported for the wider community.

Keywords : Australian English, newsreading, language change

1. Introduction

As Bruce Moore says, ‘Language is one of the most significant markers of national identity’ (2001:45). The media has a vital role to play in the search for a national ‘self’, since it acts not only as a social mirror, but is also constantly transmitting information and ideas to its audience, most regularly in the form of news bulletins. We now take it for granted that the majority of Australian newsreaders speak with an accent which identifies them as Australian, but it was not always so. For some twenty years broadcasting clung to the inherited British model of Received Pronunciation (RP), dismissing Australian English as an inappropriate and inferior variety for this purpose. Massive social change throughout the 1960s led to a greater acceptance of the Australian accent in broadcast speech, but it was not until the 1970s that the colonial mantle was finally shed, and audiences could hear something of themselves on the airwaves.

The current sociophonetic study examines what can be seen as the development of the Australian identity through the prism of radio and television news broadcasting. Using a sociophonetic approach I focus on vowel quality as the primary indicator of accent change over time. While a number of more general studies have been conducted on vowel change in Australian English, including Harrington *et al.* (1997), Cox (1999) and Cox & Palethorpe (2001), little work has been done in the specific area of news.

2. Methodology

The disadvantages of ‘apparent time’ studies are well documented by researchers studying language variation, not to mention the difficulties of obtaining data for ‘real time’ analysis. Harrington, Palethorpe and Watson (2000; 2005) closely approximated a real time study via their analysis of the Queen’s Christmas broadcasts from the 1950s to the 1980s. The current research is a *true* real time study, in that archival recordings of news bulletins going as far back as 1951 were obtained for 25 male and female TV and radio newsreaders, who were subsequently re-recorded reading excerpts from this material. Data from approximately 22 speakers will be used in this diachronic section of the research.

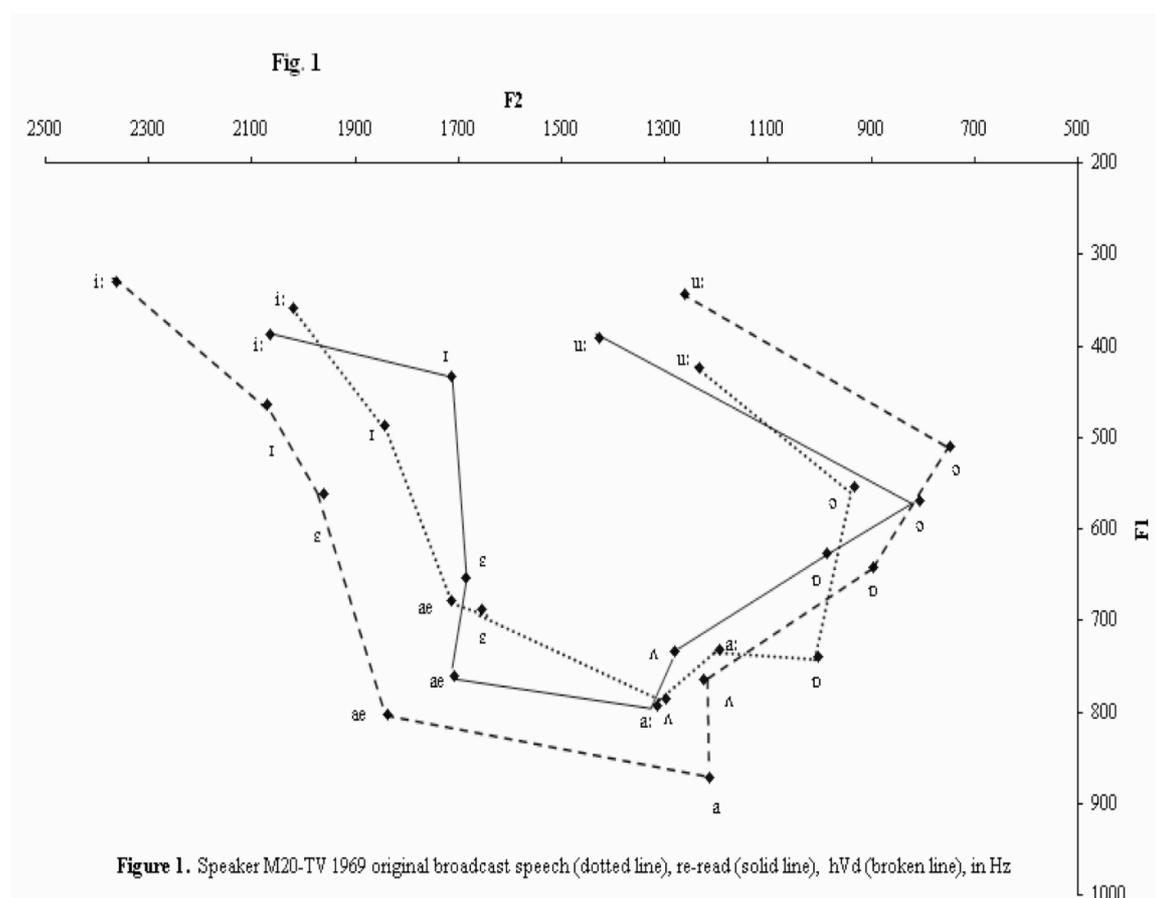
Interviews with all speakers were conducted and recorded at 44.1kHz using a Rode condenser microphone and a Tascam US-122 analog-digital conversion device, directly on to a laptop computer. Citation form data (word list) was also recorded as a reference for the vowel space. All data for the pilot study was sampled at 44.1kHz with 16 bit resolution, and wideband spectrograms were produced using Praat software (Boersma & Weenink 1992). An early pilot study looked at changes to the monophthongal vowel space of two speakers from 1969 and 1977, but further analysis is currently being conducted on a larger number of speakers, and focusing on monophthongs and diphthongs likely to show the greatest change, i.e. /i:/, /ɛ/, /æ/, /ɜ/ and /u:/, and /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /əʊ/ and /aʊ/.

3. Hypotheses

It is expected that the earlier the date of the archival data, the greater the evidence of change in vowel quality in the re-recorded data, and that such change will correlate with the findings of the researchers mentioned above (as has been found in the pilot study). Impressionistically, it would appear that by the 1980s male newsreaders had ceased imitating a British-sounding accent and were speaking in their natural voice, but that women who commenced careers in television newsreading in the early 1980s continued to speak with the ‘Cultivated’ (i.e. prestige) sociolect. It is thus anticipated that a greater degree of change will be found in the speech of four of these women in comparison with four men who were already newsreaders at that time.

4. Pilot study results

The following vowel chart shows the results for male speaker M20-TV, who was recorded in 2004 re-reading a section of one of his own news bulletins from 1969. His word list data is included for reference.



In the 35 years that have elapsed between speaker M20-TV's original and re-recorded material it is clear that his vowels have undergone change (see Figure 1). It would appear that M20-TV's vowel space has changed shape, rather than simply increased. Interestingly, the word list measurements produce a more dispersed vowel space than the original or re-read data, suggesting the speaker is hyperarticulating. All the front vowels (i.e. /i:/, /ɪ/, /ɛ/, and /æ/) are fronted (and /ɛ/ is raised while /æ/ is lowered). /ɑ:/ and /ʌ/ are lowered, /ɒ/ is retracted, /ɔ/ is retracted and raised, and /u:/ is raised and retracted.

In terms of the changes between the original and re-read vowels, /ɪ/ is raised and retracted, /æ/ is lowered, /ɑ:/ is lowered and fronted, /ɒ/ is raised and slightly centralized, /ɔ/ is retracted, and /u:/ is slightly raised and highly fronted. The changes observed to F1 for /ɪ/, /æ/, /ɒ/, and /u:/, and to F2 for /u:/ are consistent with the findings of Cox (1999), that is they are in the direction of those reported for the wider community, and away from an RP/Cultivated Australian norm.

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