Ebb and flow
A cautionary tale of language change

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1 Introduction

In the reconstruction of languages isolated communities are accorded a special status as they are assumed to still embody a stage of a language which has long since been superseded in other areas. With specific regard to the reconstruction of initial varieties which provided the input to various clusters of Anglophone varieties such as those found in the United States, the Caribbean or Canada, to mention only three prominent examples, particular attention has been paid to so-called “remnant communities” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 2002). These are assumed, usually for reasons of geographical isolation, to preserve stages no longer accessible to observation in more central, usually urban areas of the country in question.

As a default hypothesis this is basically acceptable. However, there are a number of factors which operate in the sociolinguistic environment of every variety which may well disturb the direct continuity of features across many generations. The danger here is that one sees feature values in the remnant community which differ from feature values in more central areas and automatically assumes that the former are historically prior to the latter. This may be the case but is not necessarily so. The reason is that the transmission of features across generations may be subject to shifts, indeed reversals, which have nothing to do with the relative isolation of the community. These shifts of transmission are referred to collectively in the present paper as ebb and flow.

One particular reason for this label is that frequently one has a reversal followed by a reinstatement of a feature value, hence the bidirectionality implied in ebb and flow. For instance, it is not inconceivable that a variety may show [a] as realisation of an input /a/, then shift to [æ] or [ɛ], and revert to [a] again at some later stage. In this hypothetical instance, a linguist observing contemporary [a] in a remnant community is likely to conclude that this is a preservation of the original realisation, especially if some other non-isolated, often urban variety from the same group shows [æ]. In this case the observation is correct but not the assumption that the [a] variant was transmitted throughout history as an unaltered form of the input /a/.

The example just given is a singular instance of ebb and flow. But more often
than not what one is confronted with is a reversal of a general tendency. In phonology for instance this may take the form of a general directive, say, to raise low vowels, and this may later be reversed hence instantiating ebb and flow. As will be evident presently, ebb and flow can result from two main causes. The first is where one generation reacts due to its perception of a salient but relatively stagnant feature of the speech of that generation which precedes it. The second is where one generation reacts to an ongoing change which is favoured by the generation preceding it. In the first case of of course the feature in question may itself be the result of an earlier change, say the raising of /a/ to [æ] which is, however, invisible to the generation reacting against it. The second situation is of special theoretical interest because it may offer a principled explanation for a phenomenon which is frequently observed, namely that a change stops fairly suddenly. Linguists often speak of a change losing momentum, petering out particularly with reference to the common observation that S-curves (a graphical representation of the instance of change) rarely go to completion. But this is something which in itself needs explanation. Language change is not something which is subject to, say, the operation of friction which will bring it to a halt if it is not further fuelled with momentum. If language change does slow down then in the metaphor of the ball which ultimately stops rolling after being initially pushed, there must be some force which is analogous to friction and which is responsible for the loss of momentum. Vowel shifts are a good example here. If a language has gone through a shift from high vowel to diphthong, with /i:/ moving to /ai/ and /u:/ to /au/ (English and German are two prominent examples for this), then the parallel to friction slowing down a rolling ball must be some internal or external factor which leaves the diphthong as an endpoint. An internal factor might be the avoidance of severe homophony if /ai/ and /au/ continued further on some trajectory (though the significance of this factor should not be overestimated as alternative solutions are always possible). An external reason might be a fixing through standardisation or the lack of further shift by some prestigious, powerful social group (imitation) or, conversely, a continuation of the shift by some social group with which mainstream speakers do not want to be identified (dissociation, see below). These factors, or an appropriate combination of them, can indeed be invoked when accounting for the relative stability of [ai] and [au] for the English vowels in the PRICE and MOUTH lexical sets respectively, although these have moved to [æ] and [æʊ] in popular varieties of south-eastern British English.

In the body of the current article two prominent instances of ebb and flow will be discussed from the recent history of British English after which the notion of dissociation, which is seen as a powerful motivation for language change, is introduced and illustrated with examples from Irish English. The means for realising dissociation are also discussed, chiefly the rejection of a change which has been recently initiated and the preference for minority variants in the speech of a preceding generation. Finally, the issues of supraregionalisation (the adoption of non-local features in processes of standardisation) and of vernacularisation (the relegation of formerly widespread local features to colloquial registers) are treated as processes related to the phenomenon of dissociation.
2 Two real-life examples

2.1 Dark versus clear / in English

There is no doubt that in the history of English a velarised (dark) [h] has existed and has played a significant role in determining the phonological form of words containing it. Already in Old English breaking (diphthongisation) occurred before clusters containing /l/ followed by an obstruent as in eald ‘old’.[h] This allophone continued in Middle English and was later vocalised in syllable-final, pre-obstruent position, especially before velars as words like talk and chalk in their modern English pronunciation indicate. Much dialect evidence from England, Scotland and Ireland points to a velarisation before alveolar obstruents as well.

In the present-day English of London and the Home Counties a syllable-final velarised [h] is very much in evidence and so the conclusion that this represents historical continuity might seem straightforward. But there is evidence that velarised [H] in syllable-final position was not transmitted in an unbroken fashion for all south, south-eastern dialects of British English. Trudgill (1999) quote support from the Survey of English Dialects (Orton et al. 1968) for their view that in large parts of southern Britain a velarised [h] is a recent phenomenon going back no further than the late 19th century. The question of phonetic continuum and the interaction of syllable-initial and syllable-final positions for possible velarisation in the dialects of Britain will not be entered into here. It is sufficient to note that despite the considerable historical evidence for velarised [h] in the south of Britain in Old English (West Saxon) and in the east in Middle English there must have been a swing of the pendulum away from velarisation in the late modern period with a fairly recent reinstatement of this secondary articulation which is so prominent in varieties of southern British English today.

2.2 Low front vowels in English

The illustration given at the outset of two vowel values, [a] and [æ], both occurring in the development of a variety cluster has indeed a real-life correlate. If one views descriptions of standard British English pronunciation from the early 20th century, such as Ward (1929) or Jones (1909), then one sees that they record a somewhat raised realisation of the vowel in the TRAP lexical set. But as authors such as Bauer (1985, 1994: 120f.) have noted, this trend would seem to have been reversed by the middle of the 20th century and for the latter half there has been a noticeable tendency for a lowering of the TRAP vowel which is currently quite close to Cardinal Vowel 4 for advanced speakers of Received Pronunciation (Wells 1982: 281).

What has happened here is a classic case of ebb and flow. The realisation of the TRAP vowel had been showing a raising over some considerable length of time (for centuries, if, for instance, the word ketch ‘double-masted yacht’ is related to catch). Indeed if the evidence of transported English in the southern hemisphere (Lass 2002, Gordon & Trudgill 2002) is considered here, one can see that the raising apparently applied to all the short front vowels of southern English and not just to the TRAP vowel. However, by the mid-20th century the raised pronunciation came to be
seen as genteel and old-fashioned and a reversal of the raising tendency was initiated and within a few decades the lowering had become symbolic of advanced varieties of the standard.

2.2.1 Balance and imbalance between generations

There is a thorny theoretical point here. If, as was maintained above, the balance of the generations means that the tendencies of the young are counterbalanced by opposing tendencies of their elders, how does sociolinguistically motivated change come about at all? By ‘counterbalance’ is meant here that the overall picture at any one point in time will not show the tendencies of the younger generation too clearly because of the presence of other age-groups. But of course the older generations die off and so the tendencies of the younger generation become more prominent, on the critical assumption that in turn their children do not reject the change which their parents embody in their speech.

The question then is really, can one predict what features will be noted by a particular generation as worthy of emulation or destined to be shunned? I think the answer to this question lies in the notion of salience. If a feature is salient in a variety and if it is clearly linked to the speech of the middle and older generations then it is a likely candidate for avoidance. This account begs a large question, namely how does one determine when a feature is salient. While there is no single solution to this one can nonetheless list a number of factors which are typical of salient features.

Before offering any criteria for salience it is necessary to point out that a feature may be salient without speakers being conscious of this. Conscious awareness of features does exist and is the basis for linguistic stereotyping and commentary but it is not identical with salience as I understand and use the term here. Indeed unconscious awareness of features is a stronger factor in language change as it means that speakers will normally carry on the change which they perceive unconsciously without having to make any conscious decision on this matter.

*Suggested criteria for salient features*

1) A feature is salient if it constitutes an easily distinguishable variant of a systemic unit, e.g. [a:] or [ai] for /ai/, [u] or [u] for /u/, [a] or [p] for /o/. It is certainly salient if it involves the use of a realisation for a phoneme X which is identical with another phoneme Y, e.g. [tæŋk] for /stæŋk/ (homophonous with tank).

2) Homophonic mergers are salient, e.g. the shift of dental [t] to [t] in popular Dublin English thank [tæŋk] → [tæŋk] (homophonous with tank).

3) A feature is salient if it flouts systemic restrictions in a language, e.g. a front-rounded realisation of /ɔ:/ in British English, e.g. verb [vɔ:b].

4) If a feature involves the deletion or insertion of elements otherwise present then it is usually salient, e.g. the lack of a relative pronoun with subject reference: This is the man Ø wants to speak to you.

5) Grammatical restructuring is a process which also involves salience but may properly be regarded as a subset of (4) in that it involves deleting or inserting
elements, e.g. *They do be away for the Christmas holidays* for *They are (always) away for the Christmas holidays.*

6) Obviously salience seems to depend on the relative openness of a class. The lexicon is the most prominent of these as it is a level of language speakers continuously expand throughout their life and so have a high awareness of it. This is also the reason why prescriptive comments by lay people so often involve lexical items.

It is probably fair to say that the elements in a variety or language which are most salient for its speakers are those used in linguistic stereotypes (from whatever level of language). These are prominent features which speakers manipulate consciously, largely to achieve some kind of comic effect. Furthermore, stereotypical features are not usually determined afresh by each generation, still less by each speaker. Rather they are part of the inherited knowledge of features which are putatively typical of a certain variety. For instance, the unraised mid vowel used in words like *Jesus, decent* is regarded as stereotypical of colloquial forms of Irish English, particularly of the capital (Hickey 2000b). In a similar vein one could quote Schilling-Estes who, in her study of self-conscious speech style, maintains that “speakers highlight features of which they are most aware (whether at the conscious or unconscious level) when they give a speech performance; hence performance speech may further our understanding of issues related to speaker perception of dialect variants” (Schilling-Estes 1998: 77). She furthermore states that speech performance is not only reactive in nature and that style-shifting downwards can be deliberate at times, particularly when speakers of a rather stigmatised variety are confronted with those of more mainstream varieties. This can also be seen with the process I term vernacularisation (see 7.2 below).

3 The notion of dissociation

The theme of this section is the dissociation of one group in a society from another as a significant and quantifiable factor in language change. In a way dissociation is the opposite of the linguistic bonding which has been repeatedly ascertained for closely knit social networks (L. Milroy 1987). It is reactive in nature, i.e. it implies that there is a variety or set of varieties with features intuitively recognisable to others in contact with it and that these other speakers develop strategies to distance themselves linguistically from the group showing distinctive features. It is important to stress that dissociation is a dynamic process, i.e. it does not consist solely of the avoidance of some salient features of a particular variety.

The notion of dissociation is diametrically opposed to accommodation, the approximation individuals show in their speech to that of their interlocutors. The latter is taken to be, and have been, a powerful force in dialect differentiation as pointed out by sociolinguists repeatedly, above all by Peter Trudgill (1986: 1-38). Dissociation can be viewed as the mirror image of accommodation, the reverse side of the coin so to speak. In both instances one is dealing with an alteration in the speech of a community in contact with another. With both dissociation and accommodation one is dealing with an alteration in speech, the issue which separates them is that of direction. If the alteration can move in one direction, i.e. towards the second community with accommodation, then with dissociation it is fairly likely that it can go in the opposite direction, unless there is some objection in principle to this occurring.
Furthermore, the phenomenon of dissociation is generally attested socially, for instance in dress, food, leisure time activities, area of residence just to mention a few typical parameters of social variation. If one assumes that sociolinguistic behaviour correlates with non-linguistic social behaviour then the existence of dissociation in other social spheres outside of language gives support to the assumption of its existence on a linguistic level. In my opinion many instances of language change have probably been misunderstood as cases of dialect levelling or increases in standardisation rather than as changes where the driving force has been dissociation of one group from another. A good reason for studying the phenomenon outside of England is that it can be seen more clearly and is less likely to be misunderstood as simply a move towards standardisation.

The linguistic means for achieving dissociation thus consist — on the sound level — of choosing realisations which are maximally distinct from those in the variety from which speakers are dissociating themselves. These realisations may well display an internal systematicity of their own, thus constituting a case of a principled sound change as is the case in the current shift in vowels to be observed in Dublin. But this systematicity is probably not a characteristic of dissociation in its very initial stages. Nonetheless, there may well be linguistic conditioning on the manifestations of dissociation as will be obvious from a consideration of the current changes in the English of Dublin to be discussed below.

To begin with dissociation takes place in a weak-tie, non-focussed group reacting against another with strong ties and a clear linguistic focus. Clarity of linguistic profile would seem to be a pre-condition for another group beginning the process of dissociation in the first place. It is this clarity which renders a particular group clearly identifiable and this then leads to a desire on the part of others not to be associated with the group so easily recognisable in its speech. Here one should stress that — despite its obvious motivation — dissociation would appear to be an unconscious process.

Some principles of dissociation

1) Dissociation occurs internally in a community or across communities which interface with each other (for instance in an urban centre with a nuanced vertical social structure, e.g. in Dublin, Hickey 1999) and requires actual speaker contact for it to be triggered.

2) Speakers are not usually consciously aware of the shifting they are participating in. If there is an awareness then it is usually of single features and on a community-wide scale.

On an individual level

1) Dissociation is a cross-generational phenomenon, triggered by the weaning of a younger generation from its parents.

2) Dissociation refers usually to single features and not to whole sets.

On a community-wide level

1) Dissociation is not generally restricted to single features but embraces a much larger range of features.
The last point requires some comment. Why should community-wide dissociation involve a larger range of features? The reason I think is that when one community dissociates itself linguistically from another then the latter is usually quite different from the former, i.e. the differences span a number of features — sets of features — as can be seen in the case of the Dublin Vowel Shift discussed below.

Dissociation on an individual level is normally cross-generational and within a family, i.e. it applies to each individual separately within his/her family. There is a tension here between affiliation to a speech community and dissociation from a preceding generation. This can only be resolved by altering one or just a few salient features, otherwise the result would be too great a disruption of one’s own language and would ultimately constitute a break in linguistic continuity.

One of the clearest cases of cross-generational dissociation is to be found among immigrants where the second generation (children of the original immigrants) show little or no trace of the speech of their parents (Romaine 1984: 193). Indeed the offspring of immigrants are known for hypercorrection, especially when the variants in question evince advanced realisations which are diametrically opposed to those of the first generation immigrants. This has been noted, for instance, with the children of Italian immigrants pushing the raising of /æ/ in New York in order to distance themselves maximally from the Italian /a/ of their parents.

3.1 The position of adolescents: Peers and networks

Adolescents seem to lead all groups in their use of the vernacular (Eckert 2000: 4) and dissociate themselves most strongly from their parents. Their deliberate use of vernacular features would seem to arise quickly around or just before the onset of puberty. Thus Wolfram (1969) noted the highest incidence of multiple negation and zero copula among the 10-12 age group in his Detroit group of African-Americans. His next age bracket, 14-17, showed a decline of 10% and his adult group of up to 15% vis à vis the realisations of the young adolescents.

In western societies adolescents form networks in the schools they go to and within the peer groups with which they engage outside of school. With the finishing of school adolescents leave behind the networks they probably partook in there and form new networks, either in a working environment or at university. A characteristic of university networks is definitely their standardness in terms of language so that it is only with those pupils who do not continue to third level education that a possible switch to vernacular norms in the society around them can be observed. In either case the extremes of adolescent speech are left behind.

Increasing responsibility for one’s own life is a characteristic of approaching adulthood. During this period the majority of speakers experience a greater integration into society and this in turn leads to a linguistic swing-back in one’s late teens so that the cleft between the speech of any two generations diminishes the older the speakers of the second generation are.[5]

There have been a number of studies of the relationship with the community in which adolescents find themselves, the most prominent of which is that by Penelope Eckert in which she investigated the speech of various groups of pupils in a particular high school in Detroit (Eckert 1989a, 2000), the two most important of which are the Jocks and the Burnouts (see Chambers 1995: 172-76 for a synoptic treatment of Eckert’s findings). When discussing the relationship to society outside of school,
Eckert noted that the Burnouts have a more direct connection with life outside the school and so show the raising of /ʌ/ typical of urban centres in the Detroit area, more so than the Jocks who do not appear to have as many contacts with life outside of school. This and other observations show that the speech of adolescents often represents an extreme from which young adults later withdraw. For life beyond young adulthood (Chambers 1995: 184f.) sociolinguistic markers are no longer adopted and those which one may have acquired before as a young individual are retained. Perhaps this rather bleak view of linguistic innovation among mature adults can be tempered by referring to the adoption by this group of lexical innovations into their speech. The lexicon as an open class is one to which mature adults always add items and so lexical innovations can be easily accommodated here. Conversely, the innovations in closed classes, in phonology and grammar, are unconscious and not affected by deliberate decisions to adopt or reject and so are better markers of sociolinguistic status and attitude.

In this connection mention should also be made of so-called age-graded changes, i.e. changes which appear at a certain stage of speakers’ lives (here: adolescents, see Chambers 1995: 188-193; Romaine 1984: 104-111) would appear to be very rare if non-existent. It is difficult to imagine of a feature, say the intervocalic lenition of stops, which repeats itself for all members of a certain age-group perpetually. What does occur, of course, is that a specific generation of adolescents may show a certain feature of their speech, such as the nasalisation of vowels often found among German teenaged girls who otherwise speak standard German, but one cannot say that this is, and always has been, a feature of German adolescents.

3.2 The trajectory of change in dissociation

Assuming that speakers have acquired realisation A for feature X, say [aː] for /ai/ then they are not likely to alter this in the course of their lives. This assumption is of course what lies behind all apparent time analyses (Chambers 1995: 193-206; Downes 1998: 237-40). However, speakers may well push a value a little bit in one direction or another. For want of a better term I label this accentuation and it is this which ultimately accounts for the trajectory which a change shows over time. In the case of the Dublin Vowel Shift accentuation can be seen in the further raising of back vowels — beyond the original raising of [o] to [ɔ] — up to [o] as in boy [bɔɪ] → [bɔ] → [boi].

Determining factors in the establishment of dissociative feature values

1) Relative agreement on the nature of dissociation.
2) Relative simultaneity in the shift of a feature.
3) The distribution of a shift feature among the members of a community.

The determining factors just listed need to be discussed in some detail. Because dissociative behaviour on an individual level is likely to be restricted to the contemporary younger generation in a society, no matter how much unity there is in the type of dissociation practised by this generation, it is not certain that its linguistic preferences will persist into succeeding generations. With community-wide
dissociation, however, the generation issue is less relevant and a much broader basis for dissociation can be established. Furthermore, as a society consists of a conglomerate of speakers there is more likely to be a consensus on the nature of dissociation when one views the community as a whole. If the shift features do not show any marked distribution among specific sub-groups in a community then there is no likelihood of these becoming indicative of such a sub-group with which others in the community might not wish to identify themselves. The question of agreement in the nature of dissociation is usually not crucial in community-wide scenarios as the reaction is against a further community or sub-community, say the working class in an urban setting, whose characteristics are obvious, indeed salient. For instance in the Dublin Vowel Shift there is agreement that the dissociation from popular Dublin English is to be realised by a vowel retraction/raising tendency as the latter variety has characteristic vowel centralisation/ lowering (see summary of the present-day Dublin Vowel Shift below).

The factor of simultaneity requires some comment as well. By this is meant simultaneous shift within a key group of a society, such as fashionable, socially upward moving urbanites in contemporary Dublin. The term ‘simultaneity’ does not imply that some change occurs across an entire community at one point in time. This is extremely unlikely. All known instances of (externally motivated) change seem to imply that some sub-group within a community is the vanguard in the change.

4 Ebb and flow again

The preference or avoidance of a feature / realisational variant over time is not something which is necessarily constant in a community, that is the trajectory along which a change may be observed is not always unilinear and unidirectional. Consider for a moment the realisational spectrum for the low central vowel /a/. This vowel shows considerable variation in its realisations cross-linguistically. For instance, German displays a retracted variant [α] in the south and south-east (including Austria), the centre of the country (and the supra-regional standard) has [a] while the far north (from Hamburg northwards) shows a fronted variant nearer to [æ]. This range has been found — indeed in somewhat more extreme form — in Belfast English as has been shown conclusively by the research of James and Lesley Milroy (L. Milroy 1987: 109-38). There may be a correlation between phonemic length and relative frontness with the fronter variant occurring for the phonemically short /a/ and a central or retracted variant for the phonemically long /a:/ as in RP.[6]

In the history of Irish English a similar process has been observed. By the late eighteenth century in Dublin English a raised variant of the ash vowel was present. In 1781 the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan (the father of the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan) published a rhetorical grammar of the English language in which he inserted an appendix remarking on the apparent non-standard features of the Irish and offering suggestions about how they could improve their pronunciation. Sheridan notes (1781: 144) that the Irish used a raised version of the /æ/ vowel as seen in his rendering of gather as gether and catch as cetch.[7] The same would seem to have applied to low back vowels: Sheridan mentions pronunciations of words like psalm with an [ɔ:] which shows a raising of /ɔ:/, itself a retraction of /a:/.
4.1 The reinstatement of low vowels

At some time during the 19th century in Ireland there must have been a reaction to the raising noted by Sheridan with a reversal of this tendency so that by the beginning of the 20th century a much lower realisation of the ash-vowel and of the open o-vowel had become characteristic of supraregional forms of English in Ireland. This open realisation of low vowels is commented on by authors such as Hogan (1927: 67).[8]

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\text{18th century} & \text{20th century} \\
/\text{æ}/ & [\varepsilon] & /\text{æ}/ & [\text{a}] \\
/\text{a}/ & [\text{a}] & /\text{a}/ & [\text{a}], /\text{e}/ & [\text{a} :], /\text{o}/ & [\text{a}] \\
\end{array}
\]

What can be noted with the back vowels is that the unrounding and lowering has a systemic character: all three vowels in this area, those of the THOUGHT, LOT and PALM lexical sets, show a shift downwards and/or centralisation. This unrounding and lowering became a stereotypical feature of Irish English, particularly as extreme forms of it came to be indicative of low-prestige varieties, e. g. pronunciations like [stap] for stop were, and still are, to be found in popular forms of Irish English, whereas the supraregional standard of the south of Ireland has [stop].

By the late 20th century a gradual reaction to this unrounding and lowering set in. To understand the workings of this one must realise that popular forms of Dublin English also showed this shift and that in the course of the 1980’s and 1990’s the city of Dublin, as the capital of the Republic of Ireland, underwent an unprecedented expansion in population size and in relative prosperity with a great increase in international connections to and from the metropolis. The in-migrants to the city, who arrived there chiefly to avail of the job opportunities resulting from the economic boom formed a group of socially mobile, weak-tie speakers and their section of the city’s population has been a key locus for language change. The change which arose in the last two decades of the 20th century was reactive in nature: fashionable speakers began to move away in their speech from their perception of popular Dublin English, a typical case of dissociation in an urban setting. This dissociation was realised phonetically by a reversal of the unrounding and lowering typical of Dublin English hitherto. The reversal was systemic in nature with a raising and rounding of low back vowels and the retraction of the /ai/ diphthong and the raising of the /oi/ diphthong representing the most salient elements of the change (Hickey 1999). These changes are displayed in tabular form below.

**Summary of the present-day Dublin Vowel Shift**

- **a)** retraction of diphthongs with a low or back starting point
  - **time**  [tæm] \(\rightarrow\)  [tɛm]
  - **toy**  [tɔɪ] \(\rightarrow\)  [tɔɪ], [tɔɪ]

- **b)** raising of low back vowels
  - **cot**  [kɔt] \(\rightarrow\)  [kɔt]
  - **caught**  [kɔt] \(\rightarrow\)  [kɔt], [kɔt]
It should be noted that these changes are progressing by a slow and gradual process which affects all the elements which are potential candidates for the change. In this respect the change is progressing by means of Neogrammarian advance, i.e. every possible input is affected by the change. But because of the status of Dublin English as the variety of the country’s capital the change is also being picked up elsewhere in the country. In these cases, the spread is by lexical diffusion (Wang 1969; Chen and Wang 1975) because speakers outside of Dublin adopt the change through particularly frequent words they hear with the new Dublin pronunciation and not because of any motivation to dissociate themselves from any group of low-prestige speakers in their surroundings, the internal motivation in Dublin (Hickey 1999).

5 Features removed but not reinstated

It is quite obvious that only a fraction of forms favoured by one generation will be avoided by the following one. If the quantity of dissociation were too great then communication would be impaired and this is obviously not the case, even in very pronounced cases of dissociation. Furthermore, one can note that many features are never re-instated by later generations. This is simply feature loss. Within the context of Irish English there are a number of prominent cases of this. For instance, the lowering of /e/ to /a/ before /r/ is well-attested in the history of English and it is this which — in Standard English — lies behind the present-day distinction of person and parson. In other instances only a consideration of the language’s history reveals the source of the low vowel before /r/ as in dark from an earlier derk. In the history of Irish English there are many additional instances of this lowering to be found in various sources for the variety (the literary parodies which begin in the late 16th century and continue right to the 20th century show this). For example, the dramatist Dion Boucicault (1820-1890) has spellings such as desarve, suggesting [dɪ'zɑːrv], in several of his plays. This feature is still to be found in the early twentieth century, for instance in the play John Bull’s Other Island (1904) by George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).

5.1 Phonetic conditioning

There is another pathway which a feature may take, apart from simple loss. It can shift from an unconditioned feature to a conditioned feature. An instance of this is the raising of /e/ to [ɪ], again in the history of Irish English, where it is now restricted to a pre-nasal position for those varieties which still show the raising.
Unconditioned raising of /ɛ/ to /ɪ/  
bed [bɪd], pen [pɪn]

Conditioned raising of /ɛ/ to /ɪ/  
bed [bɛd], pen [pɪn]

The raising before nasals, e. g. [tn] for ten, is still characteristic of vernacular forms of English in the south-west and west of Ireland and of course this is attested in British English historically, the clearest case being the word English itself which shows /ɪ/ from a former /ɛ/. The disappearance of the unconditioned variants can be accounted for in terms of salience. It is these forms which are particularly salient for speakers as they are not phonetically motivated. The raising effect of nasals on adjacent vowels is a phonetically natural process, not highly salient and hence not something which speakers are likely to wish to dissociate themselves from (see section 2.1 Criteria for salience above).

6 The preference for minority variants

The discussion of dissociation so far has largely been concerned with a gradual movement away from realisations of an older generation on the part of a younger generation. But this is only one of the two possible types of dissociation to be found:

1) Introduction of a new element through shifting away from an established pattern.
2) Preference for a minority variant in the speech of a preceding generation.

In inter-generational dissociation the effect of separation from a previous generation is attained by both strategies above. For the linguist observing language change the results are, however, different. With type (1) there is a gradual change, unless speakers of the younger generation leapfrog to a new variant. Type (2) leads to a more rapid type of change. In addition the second type is a kind of change which can easily be reversed. Imagine the following scenario.

Dissociation through the preference for minority variants

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Generation 1</th>
<th>Generation 2</th>
<th>Generation 3</th>
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In (a) above the second generation favours a monophthongal realisation of /ai/ because it is clearly a minority variant in the preceding generation. This situation is reversed by the following generation because the diphthongal realisation represents a minority usage for the middle generation. This type of ebb and flow is generally unconscious. The realisations favoured or disfavoured are unlikely to be the subject of critical comment, indeed if they were this would probably distort the picture as it would involve deliberate decisions by speakers to choose or avoid a realisation.

The above case is hypothetical but would offer a principled account of variation which appears to go backwards and forwards between generations. The model presented here does in fact help the linguist in interpreting real-life cases such as the following which may serve the purpose of illustration.
In their study of Ocracoke Brogue (English spoken by an isolated community in coastal North Carolina in the United States) Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1994: 286f.) note when looking at levelling in apparent time that their group of informants often showed a somewhat irregular patterning in the levelling of past forms of *be*. They observed that a middle generation (35-59 year-olds) showed the encroachment of *was* levelling, e.g. *They wasn’t here* for standard *They weren’t here*, and that this suggested that “Ocracokers are moving away from *weren’t* regularization toward the more common mainland vernacular *was/n’t* leveling pattern, due to the outside influences of increasing tourism and other channels of communication. ... However, the speech patterns of the youngest speakers show that Ocracokers are not necessarily moving toward the *was/n’t* regularization that characterizes mainland vernacular varieties.” Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (*loc. cit.*). The relative figures for “negative *was* leveling” was 0% for older speakers (60-82), 18.2% for middle-age speakers (35-59) and 0% again for younger speakers (10-26). What is particularly interesting in this respect is that the variation goes from zero to 18% and back to zero again across three consecutive generations (the time slots lie between 22 and 26 years — roughly one generation — assuming that the youngest group was not observed until its members were at least 10 years of age).

6.1 A suggested interpretation

Now interpreting these data in generational terms leads to the following assessment of the situation. The middle generation introduces a levelling which was completely absent from the older generation. This is an innovation on their part and they reach almost 20% in the course of their development as native speakers of the dialect. The following generation has dropped this innovation entirely. An explanation for this is that the younger generation noted an instance of change which their parents were pushing through and refused to accept it. Now why should this be the case? The answer I think is fairly simple. As part of a general process of weaning themselves away from their parents, the members of every younger generation tend to dissociate themselves from that of their parents. They do this in such socially relevant areas as clothes, musical taste, pastimes and cultural outlooks of various kinds. And language is no exception. If, as is the case with the levelling reported by Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, the parents of the younger generation have initiated a change, then their children may well react to it by refusing to accept it.

While I believe this to be the case, there are a number of crucial points connected with this issue. After all, if every generation reacted by rejecting change in a preceding generation, then every change would be reversed by a following generation. But this is obviously not so and there are a number of reasons why this is not the case, two of which are particularly significant.

Firstly, change is carried by an entire speech community. At any one time there will be an approximate balance between young, middle and older generations in a community. There can never be a time (in any community which exceeds a few hundred in size) when the young generation is numerically so overwhelming that its linguistic preferences automatically become the norm in the community. To put it another way, the balance of the generations is enough to ensure that any tendency in one direction by a young generation will be counterbalanced by differing tendencies in other directions by the members of other generations. Furthermore, it is not certain that all members of the younger generation will distance themselves equally from the
speech of their parents. In their investigation Schilling-Estes and Wolfram separated their informants by generation which rendered the distribution visible, but for the community as a whole this could not have been observed: all that could have been seen then would be a slight overall increase in “negative was leveling”.

The second reason why change is not always rejected is that not all items of change are associated exclusively with a preceding generation. For this to be the case, the change in question should really have been initiated by the middle generation (as was indeed the case in the group investigated by Schilling-Estes and Wolfram). If the change is somehow perceived by the younger generation as fashionable and prestigious then its chances of survival are very good. Contrariwise, if a change is deemed by a young generation to be old-fashioned then it may disappear quickly. Indeed many instances of a change disappearing very suddenly are likely to have this cause: the following generation simply decides not to accept it. Of course, this is not the only solution. A change or a feature (either the result of a completed or a moribund change or simply an archaism) may be relegated to a vernacular register and still be accessed by young speakers when style-shifting downwards. A case in point would be the use of a high back rounded vowel [u] in the STRUT lexical set (Wells 1982) in Dublin English. This is definitely not the realisation used by class-conscious urbanites (and has not been for a long time), but it is used for vernacular effect when imitating a popular Dublin English accent, especially by those speakers who come from the metropolis, stereotypically in their pronunciation of Dublin as [dublin].

The example from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1994) just discussed is especially clear because the researchers divided their informants by generation and because sociolinguistically the community is relatively homogeneous. However, there are examples on a macro-level which illustrate the phenomenon equally well. The next example is also taken from the work of Wolfram and Schilling-Estes. This time they report that the Southern rural form fixin’ to as in She’s fixin’ to go to church now has recently spread from rural to urban areas in Oklahoma in the face of mass migrations into the state by non-Southerners (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998:30).

Is a shift in population really necessary to account for this? Assuming that fixin’ to was a minority variant for a particular generation then a following generation could have picked this up and decided unconsciously to further it. If this type of linguistic behaviour has validity then it offers a principled explanation for the revitalisation of apparently moribund forms in a language.

There is an important theoretical implication flowing from this interpretation, i.e. that dissociation consists not just of avoiding salient features of another group, but of actively favouring minority variants of this group. The upshot of this is that one does not always have to appeal to such external factors as population movements, language contact, bilingualism and the like.

7 Further issues in dissociation

7.1 Supraregionalisation

There are a range of means available to dissociate oneself from speech one regards as non-prestigious. In the history of Irish English, and presumably in that of other extraterritorial varieties, many of the salient features have been removed not so much
by the development of new realisations for existing local features (though this is the
case with the Dublin Vowel Shift, see above) but by the adoption of more mainstream
realisations from an extranational norm, southern British English in the case of Irish
English. For this process I use the term *supraregionalisation* because the
extraterritorial variety which goes through this process is not locally bound at its
location and is often a *de facto* standard there.

Supraregionalisation is a process of direct substitution: a local realisation X
for a feature is replaced by a mainstream realisation Y, irrespective of its formal
proximity to X. This means that supraregionalisation does not involve a cline, for
instance the modern replacement of [ar] by [ɔɹ], as in [sɔːrv] serve, does not show phonetically intermediate stages. For the history of Irish English one can take
a work like Walsh (1926) which has an Appendix *Shakespeare’s pronunciation of
the Irish brogue* in which he lists some of the features which he considers typical of
the Irish brogue (a strongly local pronunciation). The value of Walsh’s discussion
today is that it offers a series of attestations of Irish English colloquialisms exactly
half-way between Sheridan in the late 18th century and the late 20th / early 21st
century. He claims that in Irish English at the late 19th / early 20th century Middle
English /e:/ remained unshifted, i.e. *meat* was [mɛt], *clergy* was used for *clergy,*
*goold* for *gold,* *door* with [uː], [bljuː] for *blue* — the latter a possible late example of
non-deleted /ɹ/ after /ʌ/.

7.2 Vernacularisation

All the features just mentioned in connection with Walsh (with the partial exception
of unraised /e:/) have been lost in Irish English. But loss is not always the fate of features
which have been replaced through supraregionalisation in an extraterritorial variety.
Another pathway of development is for the local pronunciation to be retained by being
relegated to a vernacular mode of speech. This process of vernacularisation involves
a lexical split in that the meaning of a word with the local pronunciation is different
from that with the supraregional pronunciation. For example in local forms of Irish
English the word *Jesus* with the non-raised vowel, i.e. [dʒɛːzɪz], is an exclamtion of
dismay or surprise and not a religious reference.

Another prominent instance of this vernacularisation involves the pronunciation of Middle English /ɔː/ before /l/C. This has developed regularly into
/ɔː/ in Irish English, corresponding to /əʊ/ in Received Pronunciation. But many
descriptions of, and references to local pronunciations in the north and south of
Ireland from the early modern period onwards mention the use of [au] in this lexical
set, for instance Joyce has *old, bold, cold, hold* (1910: 99) with [au]. This is a
remnant of historical vowel breaking before a velarised [ɬ] but which has been lost in
mainstream varieties of Irish English through supraregionalisation (the adoption of /ɔː/
in this position). Nonetheless, the older pronunciation is retained in the case of *old*
and *bold*, as [aul] and [baul] respectively, which have undergone a lexical split such
that then the older pronunciation (without the post-lateral stop) is used to convey an
element of affection and/or sneaking admiration. One can also see that where a former
pronunciation was not retained for vernacular purposes, as with *cold* [kauld] and *hold*
[hauld], then it was dropped entirely.
7.3 The gender issue

Eckert (1989b: 259ff.) when interpreting data of the Northern Cities Chain Shift surmises that those changes which are more clearly manifestations of counteradult norms are used less by females than males and that “in both cases — the girls’ greater differentiation of the newer changes and their greater use of older changes — the girls’ phonological behaviour is consonant with their greater need to use social symbols for self-presentation.” (Eckert 1989b: 264)

The paradox that females are both more conservative and pick up innovations more readily is resolved by viewing the items in questions (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 187, Gordon 1997). With variants which are, and have been for some time, in relative equilibrium, females tend to prefer the less vernacular of the two, e.g. you for youse or [ʌ] for [u] in the STRUT lexical class in colloquial Dublin English. However, for innovative realisations, such as [a1] for [ai] in the PRIZE lexical class, women definitely lead the field and hence are the motor in community-wide dissociation.

If the interpretation of differential linguistic behaviour by women in terms of symbolic power is correct then inter-generational dissociation is not likely to show great variation across the sexes, or only inasmuch as this locus is identified with claims for power by individuals. In a community setting the matter is quite different as female speakers compete with males for the possession of symbolic power and so are likely to adopt innovative realisations which give women a putative leading edge over males in terms of social status. This interpretation matches the patterns of conservative versus innovative realisations with regard to the Dublin Vowel Shift, see above.

8 Conclusion

The title of this article is intended as a warning against a too ready assumption that present-day realisations of features which were present in the historical input to a variety cluster can be assumed to be original. Just because features match observations of earlier forms either in a comparative-linguistic sense or in terms of the socio-geographical position of a particular variety within a cluster, i.e. with “remnant communities”, is not proof that they have been transmitted unchanged through history. Short front vowel raising and lowering and the alteration of dark and clear / in the history of British English show that the assumption of historical continuity is often too facile. In the same vein the Irish English data, with the consideration of ongoing changes in Dublin English, shows that ebb and flow stems ultimately from dissociation in speech between generations (individual dissociation) or between varieties of varying sociolinguistic status in contact with each other (community-wide dissociation). The lesson to be learned is that a contemporary realisation may be similar to a first input, but not necessarily a direct reflex of this if ebb and flow has gone through a complete cycle.
Notes

~1 This applies to West Saxon but not Anglian from which Modern English *old* is derived.

~2 The iconic status of variables (Eckert 2000: 120) has to do with salience. Eckert mentions the case of (e) lowering which shows a deliberate reversal of a general trend for raising of short front vowels in Detroit and its geographical setting.

~3 This is a matter which is not dealt with in any introduction to sociolinguistics, though it is hinted at in Eckert (2000: 108ff.) where she shows that the speech of adolescents is determined by peers and does not reflect the socioeconomic status of the parents and hence their patterns of linguistic variation.

~4 Dissociation would seem to have nothing to do with hypercorrection which is an adult phenomenon unless the dissociation is by chance formally coincidental with instances of hypercorrection as with the raised variants of */a/* favoured by second and later generations of Italian immigrants in New York city.

~5 Chambers (1995: 169-206), with reference to Eckert’s earlier Detroit study (Eckert 1989a), deals with the speech of adolescence and also mentions the factor of weaning from parents as important for the particular profile of adolescent speech.

~6 Notable exceptions to this distribution are Dutch and Hungarian with a retracted short */a/*, i.e. [a:] and a central-to-front variant for the long vowel as in Dutch [aː].

~7 This raising is not insignificant in the history of English in England as evidenced by such words as *keg* (from Middle English *cag*, itself from Old Norse *kaggi*) and of course by the standard pronunciations of *many* and *any* with an */e/* vowel.

   It should also be mentioned that Sheridan was probably talking about middle-class Dubliners in the appendix to his grammar, i.e. the social group from which he himself stemmed. What was happening to contact English in the rural west of the country or indeed in lower-class forms of Dublin English does not seem to have interested him.

~8 Hogan is not quite accurate in this respect. He maintains that Middle English */a/* was retained as such or indeed retracted in Irish English (his Anglo-Irish, *loc. cit.*) and quotes a single word, *bhlock*, the glossaries of the highly deviant and now extinct dialect of Forth and Bargy in the extreme south-east of Ireland (Hickey 1988) as evidence for the retraction of */a/*. On the other hand he seems to regard those instances of */a/*-raising which are to be seen in parodies of Irish English as in the examples from the satire *The True-born Irishman* (1762, written by Charles Macklin in which he satirises Dublin manners of the time) as cases of hypercorrection without offering any support for this. The raising of */a/* is to this day particularly obvious in rural forms of southern Irish English, e.g. *part* [pərt], something which Hogan does not give appropriate attention to.

~9 Some features are older and have been lost without any trace, for instance the lengthening of */i/*. The Early Modern material has spellings like *breeke* ‘brick’, *neeagrdly* ‘niggardly’ and *reeede* ‘rid’ which have disappeared entirely (Hogan 1927: 69).

~10 For instance in *The Shaughraun* (1875) and *Arrah na Pogue* (1864).
Raising before nasals can be accounted for acoustically. Because the nasal cavity is opened for nasals, an anti-resonance occurs which interacts with that in the oral cavity. This anti-resonance sets in between 800 and 2000 Hz (Fry 1979: 118f.). The energy maximum in the first formant of the nasal is always low because of the anti-resonance. This has the effect of depressing the first formant of the flanking vowel. Consider now representative values for the first and second formants of the five most common vowels (Fry 1979: 79).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>(in Hertz)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/e/</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1750</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>900</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>950</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The values for F2 are irrelevant in this context as nasals only have a very weak second formant but for F1 one can see a lowering of its value the higher the vowel, hence the raising effect of adjacent nasals on mid and low vowels.

This example is not as hypothetical as might seem. Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes (personal communication) have noted for Ocracoke Brogue that within the families which they investigated some younger speakers produce vowel realisations which are diametrically opposed to those of their parents, e.g. [a:] when the parents would have [ai] in the PRICE lexical set.

Wells (1982: 149) has only one class for the (ai) variable, namely PRICE. But in Dublin English (and other varieties such as forms of Scottish English) it is necessary to have two lexical classes here, one with (ai) before a voiceless consonant, PRICE, and one before a voiced consonant, PRIZE.

References


Joyce, Patrick Weston (1910) *English as we speak it in Ireland.* Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son.


Sheridan, Thomas (1781) *A rhetorical grammar of the English language calculated solely for the purpose of teaching propriety of pronunciation and justness of delivery, in that tongue.* (Dublin: Price).


