Dissociation as a form of language change

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine to what extent one can recognize dissociation in
the speech of a population’s members 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. 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(s) 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 of individuals to the speech 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. Dissociation gains support for
its ontological status by the existence of accommodation. 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 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 it is fairly likely that it can go in
the opposite direction, unless there is some objection in principle to this occurring. There
would not appear to be any predisposition towards unidirectionality as there is with
language internal developmental clines. 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, i.e. support to the notion of a movement
away from one’s interlocutors on the level of language.

If the assumption of its existence is deemed correct, then linguistic treatments of
dissociation would be typically concerned with documenting and analysing its
attestations. 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.

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\(^3\). 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 English in 
Dublin outlined below.

Because the reasons for dissociation lie in the (linguistic) reaction of one group 
to another it is obvious that it has an external trigger. From the present-day example 
of Dublin English one can probably conclude that initially dissociation takes place in a 
weak-tie, non-focussed group reacting to another with strong ties and a clear linguistic 
focus. Clarity of linguistic profile would seem to be a pre-condition for another group to 
begin the process of dissociation in the first place. It is this clarity which renders the 
other 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. There have been no comments by non-linguists on this process (at the very least 
within the context of Dublin English) and nonetheless it is proceeding with a high degree 
of regularity. In fact the very unconscious nature of dissociation promotes regularity. 
After all, if a process is conscious then speakers can make decisions about whether to 
partake in general or not, indeed they can deliberately choose to offer an instantiation at 
a particular point in time or not and various non-linguistic notions and attitudes can 
interfere with the operation of the process.

Before continuing a few remarks on the groups in Dublin would seem appropriate 
at this point. There is at the core of Dublin English the most pronounced form of local 
speech which is the historical continuation of the English taken to the east of Ireland in 
the late 12th century and which has developed quite independently from English in 
England since. The speakers who use this form of Dublin English are typically of low 
social and economic status as would be expected in a Western Anglophone country. Next 
there is a broad base of speakers who belong to different sub-divisions of the middle 
class and whose English is more or less identical to the supra-regional variety of English 
in the Republic of Ireland. This latter variety developed throughout the nineteenth and 
early twentieth centuries and as the speech of the metropolitan middle class had a beacon 
function for other urbanites throughout the south of Ireland. The third identifiable group is 
that of younger, socially conscious speakers striving upwards and partaking — or, 
significantly, wishing to partake — in the new-found wealth of the capital. It is this group 
which reacts most vigorously to the more traditional working-class forms of Dublin life, 
not just language, by dissociating themselves from the section of the community which 
most clearly embodies these traditional values and behavioural norms. In the linguistic 
dimension, the dissociation, which the socially mobile section of the Dublin population 
shows, is particularly marked with respect to those features of the low-status variety 
which are stigmatised. The question of stigmatisation is a complicated one and it is 
difficult to find simple criteria for determining how and when a feature becomes 
stigmatised. On the phonological level there are characteristics of stigmatised sounds 
which can be recognised. For instance any sound which represents a merger with another 
is liable to become the object of sociolinguistic censure if the merger does not apply to 
higher-status varieties in the same society. In Dublin English the merger of dental and 
alveolar stops to alveolar positions, as in the THANK and TANK lexical sets both with 
initial /t-/ is highly stigmatised; an example of a vocalic merger concerns the non-local 
vowel /ʌ/ which is realised in popular Dublin English as /u/ with homophony in word 
pairs like put and putt. A feature might be salient because it stands in sharp contrast with 
the feature found in identical lexical sets in a supra-regional variety. This is certainly the
case in popular Dublin English which has [ɔɪ], as in *ripe* [ɹip] for the [aɪ] of the supra-regional variety, including more conservative middle-class accents in Dublin itself.

Other characteristics of stigmatised features would be their systemic unusualness as with the occurrence of front rounded vowels in English, e.g. in a pronunciation of *bird* as [bɔrd]. On a syntactic level one can maintain that structures which are transparent and generally in keeping with frequent trajectories of change are not stigmatised while others which have a very exposed function, e.g. when filling an obvious structural gap, do experience stigma. An instance of both these directions would be on the one hand the low stigma attached in Dublin English to the immediate perfective with *after* as in *She's after breaking the bowl* (which represents a metaphorical extension of the locative *after* into the temporal and then the aspectual sphere) and on the other hand the much higher level of stigma which applies to the use of unstressed affirmative *do* for an habitual perfective as in *She does be worrying about the children* (for a more detailed discussion of stigmatisation).

Returning now to the social groups active in present-day Dublin one can say that the dissociating group is typically diffuse, one is dealing with a reaction by a non-local group to a strongly local one. The cohesion of the latter is not matched by any comparable social bonding on the part of the dissociating group. Of course the diffuseness of the reacting group may change. If the means chosen to achieve dissociation form a clear pattern of (sound) shift then this clarity may in turn bestow a new and distinct profile on the reacting group. It is my suspicion that in present-day urban settings the dissociating group is an incoherent one reacting to strongly localised forms of language. However, historically dissociation on the same social level may in turn have led to the genesis of new profiles for linguistic networks, assuming that the reacting group represented a cohesive social grouping of its own.

As so often with language change, there is an individual and collective aspect to the subject of dissociation. There is an obvious sense in which dissociation occurs on an individual level, as a natural process between generations. It has been reported that members of one generation show realisations of sounds in their variety which are opposed to those of the preceding generation, especially that of their parents. This type of reaction does not necessarily lead to a community-wide linguistic change, probably because the numbers of young people dissociating themselves from the language of their parents at any given time does not reach a critical mass for the dissociation to become a linguistic change in the community. Furthermore, on the individual level there is probably too much variation — with dissociation as in other respects — for this to be co-ordinated into an item of language change in the community to which those young people dissociating themselves linguistically from their parents belong.

There is another reason why dissociation as an observable feature in a variety as a whole does not just consist of the replication of individual instances. Dissociation which leads to a change in an entire variety would appear — going on the evidence from present-day Dublin English — to be a reaction by speakers to another group in their surroundings, typically in a metropolitan setting, i.e. the instances in a whole variety are not the multiplication of dissociation between generations but the reaction by one group, however diffuse, to another with obvious linguistic characteristics.

2 Comparison with dialect levelling

Dialect levelling involves the adoption of supra-local variants over more strongly
localised variants in a speech community. This would appear to be the dominant type of change for urban speech in England (to the exclusion of Scotland and Ireland) as reported in the many contributions contained in Foulkes & Docherty6. The reasons for this are well-known, including high social mobility, the increased instance of middle-class professions where people live a distance from where they work and where neighbourhood ties are weak. These are also aspects of modern life in Ireland but there are differences which have favoured the appearance of dissociation. Ireland is a country with a strong centralised orientation towards the capital Dublin (the Dublin conurbation now contains about a third of the population of the Republic of Ireland). Here the social differences are vertical, the city encompasses people of all classes with a general split between a poorer and less prestigious north-side and a more prosperous and residentially desirable south-side of the city. But there are significant differences between Dublin and major urban centres in England. For one thing, the English standard of Received Pronunciation (RP), or an accent approaching it, does not apply to Ireland, that is approximation to RP is not an option available to fashionable Dubliners looking for some non-local accent. For another, the density of population in Dublin is more concentrated than in other cities in England, except perhaps London, Newcastle, Birmingham or the Merseyside area. Within the confines of the city of Dublin one has both a unique urban dialect which goes back to the late Middle Ages and a level in society consisting of individuals who are partaking in the very considerable affluence which the city has experienced in the last ten to twenty years and who do not wish to be associated with a too parochial type of Dublin locale. In this setting, dialect levelling to the supra-regional standard of the Republic of Ireland (which itself stems from earlier middle-class Dublin usage) would appear not to be sufficient for fashionable urbanites in Dublin. They in turn initiated a process of dissociation in which they developed realisations essentially opposed to those found in popular Dublin English.

Before leaving dialect levelling it should be said that this fairly simple type of change nonetheless poses questions of theoretical importance, notably whether the changes in a dialect levelling setting are phonologically determined? If there is no apparent internal constraint on the features which are dropped or the supra-local ones which are adopted and if there are no active internal linguistic processes operating — such as raising, lowering or retraction with vowels — then the question remains: what forces determine which features from a constellation of non-localised features are adopted in the levelling context? One answer to this could be gained from a consideration of salience (see remarks above): if a local feature is highly salient then it might be avoided and hence levelled out. Conversely, if a supra-local feature is salient then it might be adopted at the expense of a local feature because it leads to an obvious increase in the non-local nature of the variety in question.

3 Ebb and flow

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. What one may observe is that a trajectory not only changes direction but indeed seems to reverse its course. This phenomenon could be labelled for want of a better term ebb and flow. The implication that a change can move in one direction and then its very opposite is intentional here. 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 \([\alpha]\) 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 \([\textae]\). 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\(^7\). There may be a correlation between phonemic length and relative frontness\(^8\) with the fronter variant occurring for the phonemically short /a/ and a central or retracted variant for the phonemically long /\textae/: as in RP. Notable exceptions to this distribution are Dutch and Hungarian with a retracted short /a/, i.e. \([\alpha]\) or indeed rounded \([\textomega]\) and a fronted variant for the long vowel as in Dutch \([\textae]\).

If one considers the histories of varieties of English for which there is reasonable documentation then examples can be found where diachronic developments seem not just to have been arrested but the trajectory for the change to have been reversed. A recent case would seem to be the tendency in the early 20th century for speakers of RP to produce a raised realisation of the /\textae/ vowel which has, if anything, been reversed so that a pronunciation closer to /a/ is to be found\(^9\).

In the history of Irish English a similar process has been observed. Certainly by the late eighteenth century in Dublin English a raised variant of the ash vowel was present as noted by Thomas Sheridan in his remarks on how the Irish speak English\(^10\) and as seen in his rendering of gather as gether and catch as cetch. This raising is not insignificant in the history of English in England as evidenced by ketch (a double-masted yacht, probably related to catch) and 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. The same would seem to have applied to low back vowels: Sheridan mentions pronunciations of words like psalm with an \([\textomega]\). At some time during the 19th century in Ireland there must have been a reaction to this raising with a reversal of the 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 supra-regional forms of English in Ireland\(^11\). Indeed for the low back vowel one can see that an essential part of the current vowel shifts in Dublin is a reaction to the lowered variant of this vowel with an increasingly closed realisation among those speakers who represent the vanguard of this change.

4 Present-day Dublin English

Any discussion of English in Dublin (henceforth: DE) necessitates a few basic divisions into types. Here a twofold division, with a further subdivision, is employed. The first group consists of those who use the inherited popular form of English in the capital. The term ‘local’ is intended to capture this and to emphasise that these speakers are those who show strongest identification with traditional conservative Dublin life of which the popular accent is very much a part. The reverse of this is ‘non-local’ which refers to sections of the metropolitan population who do not wish a narrow, restrictive identification with popular Dublin culture. This group then subdivides into a larger, more general section which I label ‘mainstream’ and a currently smaller group which vigorously rejects a confining association with low-prestige Dublin. For want of a better term, this group is labelled ‘advanced’ (or ‘fashionable’).
A central issue in contemporary DE is the set of vowel shifts which represent the most recent phonological innovation in Irish English. This is not surprising as Dublin is a typical location for language change given the following features. 1) The city has expanded greatly in population in the last three or four decades. The increase in population has been due both to internal growth and migration into the city from the rest of the country. 2) It has undergone an economic boom in the last 15 years or so, reflected in its position as an important financial centre and a location for many computer firms which run their European operations from Dublin. The increase in wealth and international position has meant that many young people aspire to an urban sophistication which is divorced from strongly local Dublin life. For this reason the developments in fashionable DE diverge from those in local DE, indeed can be interpreted as a reaction to it. This type of linguistic behaviour can be termed local dissociation as it is motivated by the desire of speakers to hive themselves off from vernacular forms of a variety spoken in their immediate surroundings. It is furthermore a clear instance of speaker-innovation leading to language change, much in the sense of James and Lesley Milroy.

4.1 The vowel shift

In present-day Dublin the speakers of what is labelled here ‘fashionable Dublin English’ (see (1) above) are engaged in a shift of most long vowels and diphthongs which constitutes a divergent development away from local Dublin English. This shift centres around the /ai/ diphthong and the low back vowels and has led to a phonetic redistribution of values for these sounds which are discussed in the following sections.

4.1.1 The variable (ai) in Irish English

The first point to note is that a conservative pronunciation of (ai) in Dublin is maintained in lower class speech as [ɔi] (historically, also the middle class realisation). The supraregional variety of the south has for (ai) a diphthong which has a low mid or low front starting point, i.e., either [ai] or [æi]. What is significant here is that a non-central starting point is the commonest one for most varieties of southern Irish English. If one now considers local DE one finds that its realisation for (ai) as [ɔi] is quite stigmatised in Dublin. One can maintain that the greater the phonetic separation of middle class DE from more local forms in the capital grew, the more the corresponding forms of the lower social classes became stigmatised.

However, the matter does not end there. For middle class Dubliners the [ɔi] or [æi] pronunciations sufficiently delimit them from local DE. But increasingly, a back starting-point is being used for this diphthong, i.e. in a word like style the pronunciation is not [stɔi] but rather [stæi]. This retracted starting-point is particularly noticeable before /r/ so that the name of the country is realised as [ɔriˈɔlənd] rather than [arˈiələnd] in fashionable DE.
4.1.2 Distribution of the (ai) shift

The most noticeable aspect of the shift is that it does not apply to all possible inputs as can be seen from the following words with (ai).

(2)  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>rice</th>
<th>rise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>[raɪs]</td>
<td>[raɪz]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>[tætʃ]</td>
<td>[təd]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>[laɪf]</td>
<td>[laɪvz]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The generalisation here is that retraction to [aɪ] only occurs before voiced segments. This makes phonetic sense: the retracted onset of the diphthong assumes a laxer muscular setting and the tongue travels a longer distance down and back for [aɪ] than it does for the unshifted realisation [ai].

It is difficult to predict whether this distribution will remain typical of the vowel shift in Dublin. It may very well be that it is only characteristic of an initial phase and that the shift will spread to all instances of (ai), masking the present distribution. Or it may freeze at this stage, as has been the case with the similar phenomenon of Canadian Raising which maintains a differential realisation of the vowels in the PRICE and MOUTH lexical sets before voiceless and voiced segments respectively.

4.1.3 General shift of low vowels

The vowel shift in DE is not just confined to the realisation of (ai). Other vowels in the area of this diphthong are affected, particularly the diphthong in the CHOICE lexical set and the low and mid vowels in the LOT and THOUGHT sets which usually have a lower realisation than in Britain (or unrounded in the case of the LOT vowel).

(3)  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>boy</th>
<th>pot</th>
<th>law</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>/ɔɪ/</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>[bɔɪ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>/ʊ/</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>[pɔt] ~ [pɒt]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>/ɔ/</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>[lɔː]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These realisations show that the change has the characteristics of a chain shift, that is, it affects several segments by a process of retraction and raising in phonological vowel space.

4.2 Dissociation: How to avoid local features

The retraction of low vowels and the raising of back vowels is the most acoustically salient feature of fashionable DE and it is this which constitutes the core of the Dublin vowel shift. But other avoidance strategies are used to maximally differentiate fashionable forms from local forms of Dublin speech. The following list gives some indication of what is involved here.

a) Local DE has a distinction between historic back and front short vowels before /r/, in the NURSE and GIRL lexical sets, [nʊː(r)ə] and [gəː(r)ə] respectively. But because the open front realisation is so typical of local DE, there is a migration in fashionable DE of historically front long vowels to the central rhotic type as seen in words from
the SQUARE lexical set like carefully [kɔr'fɔli] and daring [dɔ:riŋ]. This realisation has no precedent in the history of Irish English.

b) Connected with the previous feature is the strict avoidance of schwa retraction before /t/ in NURSE words such as third [tɔ:d], purse [pɔ:si], not [tu:zi] and [pu:zi]s.

c) The local back rounded vowel /ɔ/ in the STRUT lexical set is replaced by an unrounded front vowel which is almost /i/, as in Sunday [sI-nde].

d) A syllable-final retroflex /r/, [ɾ], is used which has the advantage of marking the /r/ even more clearly vis à vis the popular forms of DE which, if at all, have only a weak syllable-final /r/.

From these considerations it is clear that the vowel shift is not simply an approximation to mainstream British pronunciations of English, after all syllable-final /r/, the lack of /a:/ in words of the DANCE lexical set, the differential retraction of /ai/ all point to the independence of Irish English from Britain. Furthermore, there is an imperviousness in Ireland to many sociolinguistic features of British urban speech, for instance the loss of initial /h-/ as in hurry [ˈhʌri], T-glottaling as in butter [ˈbʌtə] or TH-fronting as in think [θɪŋk].

(4) Summary of the Dublin vowel shift

a) retraction of diphthongs with a low or back starting point

\[
\begin{align*}
time & \quad [tæim] \rightarrow [tæim] \\
toy & \quad [təɪ] \rightarrow [təɪ], [tɔɪ]
\end{align*}
\]

b) raising of low back vowels

\[
\begin{align*}
cot & \quad [kɔt] \rightarrow [kɔt] \\
caught & \quad [kɔt] \rightarrow [kɔt], [kət]
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\ddagger & 0 & \ddagger \\
\ddagger & 0 & \ddagger \\
\ddagger & 0 & \ddagger \\
\ddagger & 0 & \ddagger \\
\end{array}
\]

Raising

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\ddagger & 0 & \ddagger \\
\ddagger & 0 & \ddagger \\
\ddagger & 0 & \ddagger \\
\ddagger & 0 & \ddagger \\
\end{array}
\]

Retraction

\[
\begin{align*}
at & \quad \rightarrow [ət]
\end{align*}
\]

4.3 Dissociation and further change

The changes described here can be seen as characteristic of the genesis of non-local varieties of language in general. The Dublin vowel shift is clearly not motivated by any external influence on DE, such as that of southern British English, let alone American English. Furthermore, it is not internally motivated as is analogical change such as morphological regularisation. The only remaining conclusion is that it is motivated by social factors within Dublin.
It is also not unreasonable to conclude that the Dublin vowel shift shows an incipient stage of a new supra-regional variety. The emergence of non-local forms in the speech of the metropolis could well, given the dominant social and economic position of the capital, lead to these forms become defining features of the supra-regional variety of English throughout the entire Republic of Ireland.

5 Conclusion

It is my opinion that dissociation is a more widely attested phenomenon than has been hitherto recognized. It is typical of a change in its initial stages and one reason for its neglect in linguistic literature is that changes which have this origin do not betray it after a period of time because the local form of language to which speakers were reacting is no longer available or has itself changed further so that there is no obvious connection between local and dissociated forms of language. The process of dissociation may well be followed by focussing especially if the dissociated variety is uniquely connected with a certain group in a society and/or internal systematicity leads to disconnected features from the initial phase of dissociation being blended into a phonological pattern which later looks like an independent sound change. Hence many countries with supra-regional forms of language may well owe these to dissociation at some period in their history, particularly at key periods when the external social circumstances of de-localisation on different non-linguistic levels would suggest that dissociation as a linguistic phenomenon may well have been operative.

Notes


Thomas Sheridan *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, 1781).

See James Jeremiah Hogan *The English language in Ireland.* (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland, 1927), 62-77.

It is difficult to pinpoint when this change actually began. That it is fairly recent is uncontested. In the only two investigations of Dublin English to appear in the last three decades there is no mention of it, see Siegfried Bertz *Der Dubliner Stadtdialekt. Teil I: Phonologie.* (PhD thesis. Freiburg: University, 1975); Siegfried Bertz ‘Variation in Dublin English’, *Teanga* 7 (1987), 35-53. My own observations go back to the late 1980’s when retracted realisations of (ai) were becoming noticeable.


There is in fact an issue of theoretical importance here. It concerns the question of dissemination with the vowel shift and exemplifies the tension between a Neogrammarian model of language change — see William Labov (1981) ‘Resolving the Neogrammarian controversy’, *Language* 57 (1981), 267-308 for a recent discussion — and a lexical diffusion view — see Matthew Chen and William Wang ‘Sound change: actuation and implementation’, *Language* 51 (1975), 255-81; William Wang ‘Competing changes as a cause of residue’, *Language* 45 (1969), 9-25 as representative treatments of this approach. Essentially what one would appear to have is a Neogrammarian advance of the change within Dublin among those speakers actively involved in the dissociation and a lexical diffusion advance for urbanites outside of Dublin who pick up the
new pronunciation but only in common words they are exposed to and for whom the immediate motivation for the shift is opaque.


17 Within the context of Dublin English, the phenomenon of dissociation has been attested for some considerable time. Already in Sheridan’s days, linguistic behaviour was apparently prevalent which aimed at dissociating middle class speech from more local forms as evidenced in the many instances of hypercorrection which he quotes: ‘instead of great they [middle class Dubliners - Sheridan’s group of speakers, RH] say greet, for occasion, occeesion, days dees, &c.’ (Sheridan, 1781: 142).