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*Identity construction, speaker agency and Estuary English**

1 Introduction

Estuary English has been spreading in the past few decades both horizontally, i.e., geographically, across dialects, and vertically, i.e., socially, across sociolects. During its alleged percolation from the Thames Estuary (hence the term) into areas as far as Norwich or further to the north (Coggle 1993: 27), Estuary English (henceforward EE) is claimed to be used in numerous daily interactions with interlocutors from all walks of life who construct and recreate their identities via unconscious linguistic accommodation, one of the main mechanisms of linguistic change. Irrespective of how one defines this variety or whether one regards it as an accent or a fully-fledged dialect, linguistically, EE has become a new middle ground for some well-defined groups of people – in a sense, a new standard in the ascendancy. Besides introducing the reader to the main features of EE, the first part of the present study discusses the possible social factors behind this socially-induced success story, which resulted in redrawing, or rather, withdrawing linguistic barriers. The second part briefly summarises the results of an initial quantitative study on the EE-coloured idiolect of Mike Skinner, who is behind *The Streets*. This study is based on a text corpus drawn from the lyrics of his album *A Grand Don't Come for Free* (2004). The findings show that Mike Skinner's idiolect, which contains phonological and grammatical features typical of EE as well as variants not to be found in EE, reflects his social background and complex identity as well as the way how linguistic convergence underlies the spread of this intermediate variety. This convergence seems to be induced by audience design; nevertheless, his non-EE features suggest that the role of speaker agency and design cannot be downplayed in an account of complex identity, especially if one regards audience designed shifts as only responsive.

2 What is Estuary English?

The term EE was coined by Rosewarne (1984), who regards it as a "variety of modified regional speech (…) mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation". In this definition "regional", "south-eastern speech" means broad London Cockney, whereas "non-regional" means RP. The view that EE is only an accent is shared by Wells (1998), who defines EE as "standard English spoken with an accent that includes features localisable in the southeast of England". The relationship of EE to Cockney and RP seems straightforward as a great number of features are shared. Indeed, Crystal (1995: 327) speaks about a "continuum of pronunciation possibilities". EE is a fluid, fuzzy-edged entity located in the middle section of the linguistic continuum, with overlaps to both RP and Cockney. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below, in which it can be seen that the informal register of RP overlaps with the formal register of EE, while the formal register (= F) of Cockney overlaps with the informal register (= I) of EE.

[F-----**RP**-----I]   [F-----**Cockney**-----I]
[F-------**EE**--------I]

Figure 1: The RP–Cockney pronunciation continuum
(adapted from Maidment 1994)

This fuzziness, of course, questions the need to establish a variety in between (cf. Kerswill 2002: 14). We leave this hitherto unresolved issue open. However, more importantly, Crystal (1995) and Coggle (1993) regard EE as a fully-fledged dialect on the account that it has non-standard grammar to a larger extent than non-RP pronunciation features. This view is supported by the findings of the present study: besides phonological features, grammatical ones will be shown to characterise EE.

Moreover, EE is a vague term not only linguistically, but also spatially: although its heartland is around the Thames Estuary, EE is a variety widely associated with Greater London, even the Home Counties, and as a consequence, other terms like London English or General London (Wells 1994) have been coined, and to some, these terms may even seem to be more adequate than the by-now established EE.

3 Estuary English features in close-up

Identifying a speaker of EE requires of the observer some combinatory skills as there are no such things as characteristic EE features. Instead, as can be

inferred from the fact that on a linguistic continuum EE stands midway between RP and Cockney, it can be claimed that EE speakers can be spotted on the basis of a certain combination of RP and Cockney features in their speech. Far from being exhaustive, Tables 1-4 below show that some "EE features" are in fact RP or Standard English features, whereas some other "EE features" are typical of Cockney. The data come from Wells (1998), Rosewarne (1994), Coggle (1993) and Haenni (1999).

EE	RP	Cockney
☒ /hænd/	☒ /hænd/	H-dropping in content words: /ænd/ *hand*
☒ /θɪŋk/, /faːðə/	☒ /θɪŋk/, /faːðə/	TH-fronting: /fɪŋk/ *think*, /faːvə/ *father*
☒ /mauθ/	☒ /mauθ/	MOUTH vowel monophthong: /maːf/
☒ /ˈbʌtə/	☒ /ˈbʌtə/	T-glottaling within a word before a vowel: /ˈbʌʔə/ *butter*
☑ /ˈhæpi/	☒ /ˈhæpɪ/	tense vowel in HAPPY: /ˈhæpi/
☑ /ˈteɪk ɪʔ/	☒ /ˈteɪk ɪt/	T-glottaling finally: /ˈteɪk ɪʔ/
☑ /ˈmɪok/	☒ /mɪlk/	vocalisation of preconsonantal/final /l: /ˈmɪok/ *milk*
☑ /ˈtʃuːzdʌɪ/, /rɪˈdʒuːs/	☒ /ˈtjuːzdeɪ/, /rɪˈdjuːs/	yod-coalescence in stressed syllables: /ˈtʃuːzdʌɪ/ *Tuesday*, /rɪˈdʒuːs/ *reduce*

Table 1: Some phonological features
(☑ = agrees with Cockney; ☒ does not agree with Cockney)

Besides phonological features, some grammatical features are also characteristic of EE, as can be seen in Tables 2-3. As regards morphology, the most important phenomenon is invariability or generalisation throughout the paradigm (see the first three rows in Table 2); however, this phenomenon can also be found across many other English dialects, and thus it is not peculiar or unique to EE.

EE	Standard English spoken with an RP accent	Cockney
invariable *there is*	*there is*	invariable *there is*
Present Tense: generalisation of –*s*	Present Tense: no generalisation of –*s*	Present Tense: generalisation of -*s*
Past Tense plural: generalisation of *was*	*were, was*	Past Tense plural: generalisation of *was*
real, *quick*, *slow*, not as frequently as in Cockney	*really*, *quickly*, *slowly*	*real*, *quick*, *slow*

Table 2: Some morphological features

As regards syntax, the use of prepositions is worth highlighting as showing peculiarities (see Table 3).

EE	Standard English spoken with an RP accent	Cockney
get off of the bench, get up out my seat	*from*	no data in literature (= n. d.)
out the window	*out of*	n. d.

Table 3: Some syntactic features

The lexical character of EE seems to have been influenced by American English, as can be seen in Table 4.

EE	Standard English spoken with an RP accent	Cockney
cheers	*thanks; bye*	no data in literature (= n. d.)
basically (frequent use)	*basically*	n. d.
there you go (US)	*here you go*	n. d.
busy line (US)	*engaged line*	n. d.
excuse me (US)	*sorry*	n. d.
it's down to you (US)	*it's up to you*	n. d.
innit?	any tag question	*innit?*
right? (US)	any tag question	n. d.

Table 4: Some lexical features

However, as a general tendency, American English has exerted influence on other varieties of British English, too.

4 The spread of Estuary English

The percolation of EE from its London-centred heartland across dialects is mentioned in many works (cf. Haenni 1999: 6-13), although the identification of the exact mechanism of the spread is left aside. A working hypothesis can be that EE features have been spreading most probably by way of dialect hopping, to urban centres, surpassing areas in between. The spread of EE across sociolects, i.e., vertically, has also been in the forefront of EE studies. Among its causes one can find the increased mobility to the urban centres in the south (Coggle 1993: 24), the establishment of the comprehensive school system (Rosewarne 1996: 13f) and the fact that less privileged people could now be recruited into the professions (Kerswill 2001: 13). These factors all brought about considerable mixing of people speaking different dialects and sociolects, which resulted in an increase in weak social networks supporting the diffusion of innovations. These convergent tendencies then triggered a decrease in the rigidity of class distinctions. Importantly, the ascendancy of EE is not the reflection of the success of any democratic ideology prevalent in the British society but "a brutal result of new power bases (the newly wealthy) replacing older ones" (Kerswill 2001: 13) along the lines of liberal/democratic trends and the rise of meritocracy (Kerswill 2001: 11-13).

EE features can be claimed to be adopted by way of accommodation between interlocutors, which process is accounted for by the Communication Accommodation Theory (henceforward CAT) (e.g. Coupland *et al*. 1991; Trudgill 1986: 3). According to CAT, interlocutors converge their language and other behaviour in order to signal association and identification with each other or with a non-ambient reference group, whereas they adjust away when wishing to dissociate themselves from each other or from a non-ambient reference group. Short-term adjustment can result in long-term accommodation, which is how language change is effected (cf. Auer and Hinskens 2005; Kerswill 2002)

5 Who are the Estuary English speakers?

EE speakers are claimed to be found among the financially successful upwardly mobile people (overrepresented mostly in the City, in advertising and in TV stations excepting newsreaders (Coggle 1993: 75-78)), who try to fit in, and who accept changes more readily. Rosewarne (1994: 7) is in line with this, adding that EE is spoken by young middle or upper class people. As

both upper and lower class speakers are claimed to level to EE features, the adoption of EE features can be argued to result from both upward and downward accommodation. Lower class speakers accommodate upward since for these youths EE blurs class differences and obscures their social origins (Haenni 1999: 51). By contrast, RP speakers, who are typically of upper and upper middle class origin, tend to adjust their language downward to EE features. This happens in particular interactions (Wells 1998) when they desire to blend in because EE enhances their street credibility (Coggle 1993: 85; Rosewarne 1994: 7). This means that they will not be regarded posh by their interlocutors as EE makes them sound "more ordinary and less privileged than they really are" (Coggle 1993: 86). Thus, with the help of their accents, they can easily move between all levels of the society. As a consequence of this bidirectional levelling, EE starts to be regarded as a common platform, a *via media* for upper and lower class speakers alike.

6 The MeWe generation, weak ties, and the spread of EE

A hitherto neglected social factor can be argued to further contribute to the relatively rapid spread of EE features: despite the fact that the role of the youth is acknowledged in many studies (cf. Coggle 1993; Haenni 1999), in the majority of studies, this factor is not analysed any further with regard to EE. However, relating the appearance of a new, postmodern generation, which is termed as the MeWe generation by Lindgren *et al.* (2005), to the accommodation-based mechanism of adoption underlying identity construction[1] seems straightforward (although Lindgren *et al.* (2005) primarily studied the Scandinavian youth, their assumptions and findings can be safely applied to British youngsters) and readily applicable in the present study. According to Lindgren *et al.* (2005: *passim*), the MeWe generation (whose coined name implies that at the same time these youths are both individualists and collectivists) actively seeks an experience-based life, characterised by hedonism. In their quest, these youths do not follow any homogeneous or monolithic trends; instead, e.g. in clothing, they rather mix brands and styles. Importantly, this flexibility makes them socially polyvalent: they are capable of moving between various groups of people and adapt to various settings. If one accepts the view that linguistic behaviour is a component of social behaviour, such a social polyvalence, typical of the postmodern age, can be brought in line with what Maidment (1994) says about the users of EE who follow the trend to pick and mix accents. With an aim to maximise social

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[1] Eckert uses 'persona' consistently instead of 'identity' although one must be aware that these do not mean the same (cf. e.g. Eckert 2005).

success, speakers think that mixing these features in the right way can move them down and up socially (Coggle 1993, reported by Ezard 1993; cf. Haenni 1999: 59). Since the Milroys (e.g. Milroy 1992, Milroy 1987) pointed out that mobility is closely associated with weak ties, and these weak ties are conducive to language change, the rapid spread of EE may have one of its causes in the social flexibility and adaptability of the MeWe generation.

The MeWe generation's apparent inclination towards intermediate varieties makes them flexible enough to adjust to various settings. The reason behind this preference for the lukewarm middle ground may be that, according to Haenni (1999: 51), neither mainstream nor non-mainstream behaviour patterns seem to be attractive any longer: while they wish to distance themselves from the mainstream and the alternative lifestyles alike, they want to succeed along traditional lines (Haenni 1999: 51, referring to Preston 1999). To comply with this complex agenda, they are likely to need to entertain some egalitarian principles; and being the middle ground, in this respect EE proves to be a perfect vehicle for them. The outcome of all these apparently egalitarian tendencies is talking across classes (Bradbury 1994, quoted by Milroy 1999: 182). As both high-profile RP and less privileged Cockney speakers level to EE (Coggle 1993: 26), EE seems to develop into a "broad meeting place" in contemporary British society (Coggle 1993: 87).

7 Stylistic practice

In her attempt to make explicit the focus of the third wave of sociolinguistic enquiry, Eckert (2005) turns to the notions of style and stylistic practice. She asserts that so far "style has been treated as a speaker's situational adjustments in use of individual variables", and goes on to claim that "the other side of style is how speakers combine variables to create distinctive ways of speaking". This combination of various realisations of variables (including RP, Cockney and local dialectal features) is what the linguistic practice of the MeWe generation is claimed in the present study to exemplify. Although they are regarded as stereotypical in many EE studies (cf. e.g. Haenni 1999: 50-51), the terms 'Essex Man' and 'Essex Girl' may still seem to be adequate to be used as persona types, and thus, together with other similar stereotypically EE groups, they can square in with Eckert (2005) quite all right if one considers her argument:

> "When we think about the relation between variation and social groups, we don't generally identify individual variables. We have constructs in mind like Valley Girls, New York Jews, Mafiosi, Rappers, Southern Belles – persona types that constitute an

ideological social landscape. The variables that characterize the varieties associated with these types do not themselves generally mean "Valley girl, New York Jew", etc., but combine to produce those meanings." (Eckert 2005: 24)

Using the brief presentation of the case study which follows below, we are going to examine (1) how identity construction through combination of variables that originate *inter alia* from Cockney and RP can be related to the linguistic practice associated with EE speakers, and (2) how the production of the meaning of 'EE speaker' is accomplished through this combination.

8 Constructing a complex identity: Mike Skinner aka The Streets

The corpus comprises the lyrics of Mike Skinner's second album called *A Grand Don't Come for Free* (2004), and has 7795 tokens altogether. What makes Skinner's idiom relevant for an analysis on the dialect levelling process EE is argued to be representative of is that his social history is that of a typical upwardly mobile EE speaker's. Skinner was born in 1978 in West Heath, Birmingham. He refers to his background as neither working class nor middle class; instead, he labels it after a British house building company Barratt, specialising in homogenised, rather bland-looking low-cost housing; in his words, "Barratt class: suburban estates, not poor but not much money about, really boring" (no author/BBC 2003), "inhabited by young, upwardly-mobile working class families" (Ellis 2005). After spending a year in Australia at 19, Skinner moved to Brixton, London, which change must have had large-scale linguistic adaptation in store for him. By analysing his lyrics for EE traits, one can link his linguistic performance to his social history. By looking at his idiolect, one will also be able to challenge the idea that Mike Skinner has a Cockney accent (cf. e.g. Southall 2004).

At first, let us investigate the phonological features. Interestingly, the Birmingham accent layer in Mike Skinner's idiom is evident in the invariable retention of /æ/, typical of the northern varieties of British English, instead of the southern type /aː/ (Hughes *et al.* 2005: 60-62) in words like *pass*, *fast*, *last*, *after*, etc. to be found in the corpus. Besides this layer, of the eight phonological features investigated in the present study, one can find significantly high usage frequencies of five typical Cockney features. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, TH-fronting (95%; N=92), T-glottaling word finally (98%; N=638), T-glottaling before vowels (96%; N=71), Y-tensing (93%; N=85) and yod-coalescence (100%; N=1) are the majority pattern in the corpus. Looking at the sample size for this very last variable, one must be aware, however, that the sole instance of yod-coalescence cannot guarantee a

statistically reliable result. By contrast, three typical Cockney features occur with significantly low usage frequencies in Skinner's idiolect. These include H-dropping (1%; N=78), *mouth* smoothing (13%; N=116) and L-vocalisation (12%; N=17). As a consequence, Skinner's accent can be placed between Cockney and RP, possibly slightly closer to the Cockney end of the spectrum than to the RP end. However, it is worth noting that one of the most salient (and stigmatised) Cockney features, H-dropping, is almost totally absent, and thus Skinner cannot at all be claimed to be a broad Cockney speaker.
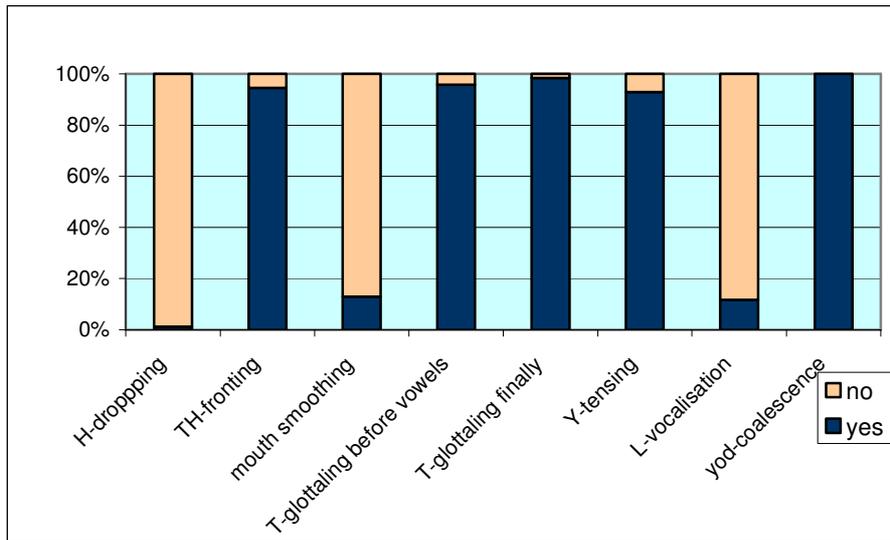

Figure 2: Phonological variability in Mike Skinner's (aka *The Streets*) idiolect
on the basis of eight phonological features

In order to claim that Skinner's idiolect is neither purely Cockney nor RP, one must consider grammatical characteristics, too. As regards morphology, there are no instances of double negation, the use of *ain't*, invariable *there's* and other morphological features which would suggest a non-standard grammar, of which Cockney would boast. Nevertheless, one can find some cases of adverbs without the suffix *-ly*. Consider examples (1-3) below:

(1) my heart is beating too **quick**   (*Blinded By The Lights*)
(2) my head is twisted **severe**   (*Blinded By The Lights*)
(3) I flew a bit **quick**   (*It Was Supposed To Be So Easy*)

What concerns syntax, the peculiar use of prepositions can be seen in the following corpus examples (4-7) below. In (4) one can see variability in the

use of the standard preposition *out of* and the non-standard *out* within one sentence.

(4) Then he gets up and runs **out** the kitchen, and **out of** the door
     '(…) runs out of the kitchen (…)'   (*Empty Cans*)
(5) When I noticed **out** the corner of my eye   (*Fit But You Know It*)
     '(…) out of the corner of my eye'
(6) phoned this company **out** the yellow pages   (*Empty Cans*)
     'phoned this company out of the yellow pages'
(7) borrow water **off** this man   (*Blinded By The Lights*)
     'borrow water from this man'

The negated present tense 3rd person singular is formed with *don't* instead of the standard *doesn't*, a common form found in the English varieties throughout the world (Hughes *et al*. 2005: 28). Consider examples (8-9):

(8) If he **don't** stop lookin' at the TV though   (*What Is He Thinking*)
(9) It **don't** really matter anymore   (*Get Out Of My House*)

Finally, as regards lexis, of the typical EE lexical items listed in Table 4, it is only *basically* that can be found in the corpus (10).

(10) Because **basically** I love her   (*I Wouldn't Have It…*)

Nevertheless, as it is the frequency of *basically* that allegedly makes the difference between EE and the standard variety spoken with an RP accent, the sole occurrence of this item cannot be deemed sufficient, to say the least.

9 Where speaker agency comes in

In conclusion, Mike Skinner's idiolect can be claimed to represent neither Cockney nor RP; instead, it is a mix of certain Cockney/south-eastern and RP pronunciation features, with a slight Birmingham colouring. Since the only non-standard grammatical divergence is the peculiar use of some prepositions and the negated form of the present tense 3rd person singular, the recurrent popular, unreflecting claim that Skinner is a Cockney speaker can be ruled out. The character of his idiom and his social history are in line with the typical social background of EE speakers and the process of linguistic convergence/accommodation, underlying the spread of intermediate varieties, in that he is an upwardly mobile youth migrating to London, producing commercial works targeting wider audiences. In order to maximise social

success through a favourable acceptance of his works in as many settings as possible, the language of his projected audiences is adjusted to. At the same time some part of his native linguistic identity is retained since he designs his speech to project an image which includes not only his acquired identity associated with EE but also an image which subsumes some significant dialect traits in alliance with his Birmingham working class background. Such an efficiently flexible construction and projection of identity through speaker agency, combined with audience designed shifts, with accommodation as the main mechanism, is one of the most tangible consequences of EE's status as a "levelling process" (Kerswill 2002: 14) and of its function as a "broad meeting place" (Coggle 1993: 87) in the south-east of England. This possible interplay between audience and speaker designed shifts have the following theoretical implications: besides conceptualising EE as a levelling process on the basis of the accommodation process involved in it, in the light of this strategic identity projection and (re)creation, it may also seem to be promising to alternatively conceptualise EE as a resource pool from which one can select features and add them to the feature pool of one's idiolect.

10 'I really feel like things clicked into place at some point'[2]

In the present study, first, a succinct outline of the main characteristics of EE was provided, then, the social processes were pointed out behind the spread of this variety. To explain the relatively rapid diffusion discussed in the first main part (sections 2-6), some new relevant points were advanced including the emergence of the MeWe generation and the link between the polyvalence in the linguistic practices of this generation and the weak-tied networks they participate in while constructing and recreating their identities in fleeting interactions.

In the second main part of the study (sections 7-9), in order to point out the possible links between identity practices, the role of speaker agency and accommodation, first, the corpus findings obtained from *The Streets* lyrics were presented. Next, it was discussed as to where to locate Mike Skinner's idiolect in the light of the aforementioned practices and processes. In this way, his social and linguistic profile could be connected, involving capturing the process of identity construction via speaker agency and accommodation, which seem to be at work simultaneously. Realising the potential which a levelling process like EE can have for the management of complex linguistic agendas, it was suggested that EE could also be viewed as a convenient resource pool of linguistic features that themselves mostly originate from

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[2] Taken from the track *Empty Cans*.

Cockney and RP and combine to produce an EE stylistic practice. As a further step in the combination process pertaining to Mike Skinner, from this pool individual variants can be claimed to be drawn for particular interactions during a process in which some of his native linguistic features are retained. It was concluded that through this complex stylistic practice, Mike Skinner could project a complex identity sufficiently congruent both with his personal background and with the expectations of his target audience.

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