



© The author, 2025

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

ACCENT LEVELLING IN THE NORTH OF ENGLAND: A STUDY IN YOUNG ADULTS

Daria Eliseeva

University of Valencia

eliseeva@alumni.uv.es

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5065-6918>

Dialect levelling, defined as the “reduction or attrition of marked variants” resulting from dialect contact (Trudgill 1986, 98), has been the subject of various studies on Northern British English (see Kerswill 2003; Strycharczuk et al. 2020). There is evidence of levelling occurring at the phonetic level, accompanied by a shift in speakers’ accent self-identification. Rather than identifying with their regional accent, speakers increasingly describe their accent as “Northern”.

This study aims to explore the extent of accent levelling among young adults. Recent research has highlighted the role of accent bias on young adults, suggesting that this demographic may be particularly susceptible to sound change (The Sutton Trust 2022). To examine the spread of accent levelling, this paper focuses on assessing the phonetic changes in vowel realisation in the lexical sets PRICE (/aɪ/), FACE (/eɪ/), and GOAT (/əʊ/), which are traditionally monophthongal in most of Northern England (e.g., PRICE as [a:], FACE as [e:], GOAT as [o:]), but are becoming increasingly diphthongised. Data from eight speakers was analysed using quantitative acoustic measurements and qualitative

evaluation. Results show that young adults in Northern England overwhelmingly produce these vowels as diphthongs, which reinforces the evidence for ongoing accent levelling in their speech.

Keywords: accent levelling; Northern British English; dialectology; sociophonetics.

1. Introduction

Accent levelling refers to the reduction or loss of marked regional phonetic variants in the context of dialect contact, as part of the broader process of dialect levelling (Trudgill 1986, 98). As a result of this process, distinct regional accents may converge, losing some of their original features and giving rise to a pan-regional variety with more general characteristics across a broader geographic area. In British English, this phenomenon has been documented, particularly in relation to social mobility, with some studies linking it to accent bias or prestige in the United Kingdom (see Samarasinghe et al. 2019; the Sutton Trust 2022).

Accent discrimination persists in the UK, with many speakers still feeling pressured to modify their accents towards a more standardised RP-like model to advance socially, especially in professional or academic settings (Coupland and Bishop 2007; Levon and Fox 2014). Speakers may choose to adopt phonetic features associated with more socially prestigious or neutral forms of speech, which in turn contributes to accent levelling.

The existing evidence on dialect levelling in the North of England suggests that while some regional features are undergoing changes, this does not imply a complete shift towards RP (Watt 2002; Strycharczuk et al., 2020: 14). Instead, the quintessential Northern features, such as the lack of distinction between the FOOT/STRUT and BATH/TRAP vowels, are largely intact (Strycharczuk et al., 2020: 14). It is contended here that General Northern English (GNE) is emerging as a dialectal variety within the Northern British English dialect group (Watt 2002; Honeybone 2007; Cardoso et al. 2019; Strycharczuk et al. 2020). However, the defining characteristics of GNE remain under debate. While the

absence of the FOOT/STRUT and BATH/TRAP splits is considered a core trait of Northern English varieties (Wells 1982b; Watt and Milroy 1999), other features contributing to GNE require further examination. Identifying these features more precisely is essential for understanding how accent levelling manifests itself in Northern English, as well as for assessing its role in the development of GNE as a separate, unique variety.

While previous studies have examined dialect levelling in Northern British English (Cheshire et al. 1993; Watt 2002; Kerswill 2003), there remains a notable lack of research on how vowel realisation patterns are evolving, particularly among young adult speakers, a crucial demographic in linguistic change. This paper addresses this gap by providing an acoustic and sociolinguistic analysis of vowel variation in the PRICE, FACE, and GOAT lexical sets, which are traditionally monophthongal in the North. For example, PRICE words like “time” and “ride” are typically pronounced with [a:] rather than the diphthongal /aɪ/ found in Southern British English; FACE words like “make” and “rain” are realised with [e:] rather than /eɪ/; and GOAT words like “go” and “stone” are produced with [o:] instead of /əʊ/. These vowels, however, are becoming increasingly diphthongised, particularly among younger speakers, due to the levelling process (Watt 2002; Haddican et al. 2013).

Additionally, this paper will investigate whether young adult speakers identify with their local regional accent variety or with a generalised Northern English one, thereby contributing to research on sociophonetic variation and identity in the region. By examining the interplay between phonetic variation and social identity, this study contributes to the broader discussions on language change, regional identity, and the role of dialect in social mobility in the UK.

2. Theoretical framework

Northern British English dialects have been documented extensively for centuries, with some of the earliest known records of the Lancashire dialect appearing in verse form, dated approximately 1690–1730 (Anonymous, c. 1690–1730). A more detailed

description in prose followed in John Collier's 'A View of the Lancashire Dialect' (1746). In recent decades, dialect levelling in Northern English varieties has gained more attention, with social mobility and dialect contact contributing to phonetic convergence in the region (Strycharczuk et al., 2020). Research on accent bias further suggests that societal pressures toward linguistic standardisation remain strong in Britain and are most pronounced in the professional and academic domains (The Sutton Trust 2022).

This section situates accent levelling within the broader framework of dialect levelling and clarifies the boundaries of the linguistic North of England, establishing where Northern British English varieties are spoken. It also identifies key phonetic features subject to levelling, providing a foundation for understanding the sound changes analysed in this study.

2.1. Accent levelling

According to Trudgill (1986, 98), dialect levelling refers to the reduction or attrition of marked regional features due to dialect contact and increased mobility. In situations of dialect mixture, the survival of particular variants depends on demographic proportions—more widespread variants are more likely to be retained. At the same time, minority forms tend to disappear unless they are linguistically simpler (Trudgill 1986, 126).

This study focuses on accent levelling, which manifests through pronunciation shifts that lead to the emergence of more neutralised, pan-regional varieties. The influence of social mobility is particularly relevant, as phonetic features associated with lower-status groups are often stigmatised.

For example, Haddican et al. (2013) found that monophthongal pronunciations of FACE (e.g., when the name “Dave” is pronounced as [dæ:v] (Haddican et al. 2013, 383)) and GOAT (e.g., when the word “post” is realised as [pɔ:st] (Haddican et al. 2013, 384)) in Yorkshire were linked to working-class identity, with some speakers pejoratively associating them with “chavs” (Haddican et al. 2013, 384). This illustrates how accent bias can pressure speakers to shift toward socially prestigious, diphthongal

realisations, and away from traditional realisations so as to avoid social judgement.

Standardisation can therefore be seen as a phonetic shift toward the politically dominant variety—in the UK, this is Standard Southern British English, the modern equivalent of RP (Labov 1994, 23; International Phonetic Association 1999, 4). Evidence from the Sutton Trust’s 2022 study suggests that young adult speakers at times feel compelled to modify their accents to avoid negative social judgments (The Sutton Trust 2022, 25). According to the same study, 41% of Northern English university students believe their accent may affect their career prospects, while almost half (47%) report having been mocked for their speech (The Sutton Trust 2022, 4).

2.2. The North of England: geography vs. language

Northern British English is most commonly defined in contrast to Southern British English when comparing syntactic, lexical, phonological or phonetic features which may be present in the North but not in the South (Strycharczuk et al. 2020, 2). These dialectal divergences are primarily evident in pronunciation. Wells (1982b, 349) suggests that the population of England is divided nearly equally between the Northern and Southern dialect regions, with each exhibiting distinct linguistic features.

Although Northern British English is generally associated with the geographic North of England, the linguistic boundaries do not necessarily match the administrative divisions. Geographically, Northern England consists of the regions of North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber. However, in linguistic terms, the North of England traditionally also encompasses some parts of the Midlands (Wells 1982b, 350). The Midlands share features with both the “middle north” (which includes Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, and South Yorkshire) and the Southern dialects, where cities like Leicester and Nottingham align more closely with the Northern varieties, and Birmingham exhibits distinct phonological characteristics altogether (Wells 1982b, 350-351).

Two key linguistic features differentiating the North and South of England are the FOOT-STRUT and BATH-TRAP vowel splits. In Southern English varieties, the vowels in FOOT and STRUT words are typically different: for instance, “put” (a FOOT word) is realised as [pʊt] and “putt” (a STRUT word) is usually pronounced as [pʌt]. In contrast, in Northern dialects, both words are pronounced [pʊt] (Wells 1982b, 349).

Similarly, in Southern British English, “gas” (a TRAP word) is pronounced as [gæs], while “glass” (a BATH word) contains a long vowel [glɑ:s]. In Northern England, these words rhyme as [gas] and [glas]. (Wells 1982b, 349).

Historically, studies of Northern English dialects (e.g., Orton et al. 1978; Wells 1982b) identified specific isoglosses—the lines dividing distinct dialect features—corresponding with the FOOT-STRUT and BATH-TRAP splits. Wells defined the linguistic North as “everything from the Severn-Wash line northwards” (1982b: 350), as shown in Figure 1. He based his division on the findings of the Survey of English Dialects (carried out by Orton and Halliday between 1950 and 1961), taking into account their data on the pronunciation of the vowels in FOOT and STRUT lexical sets, as well as BATH and TRAP (Orton and Halliday 1962). Wells claimed that the isoglosses for the BATH-TRAP and FOOT-STRUT split coincided, although there was some variation to the West (1982b, 351-354).



Figure 1. Map of UK regions displaying isoglosses according to Wells (1982b, 350) (dashed red line) and Trudgill (1999) (solid dark red line)

Trudgill, however, considered only the FOOT-STRUT data when defining the boundary between the North and South, shifting the isogloss further north (Trudgill 1999), as seen in Figure 1.

Recent studies, such as that by MacKenzie et al. (2022), show that the FOOT-STRUT isogloss has moved northward, but overall, the boundary of Northern English remains largely consistent with the earlier studies. The exact location of these isoglosses is still debated, and the boundaries of the linguistic North and South are not always clear.

2.3. Levelling markers

As regional distinctions diminish in favour of more pan-regional features, certain vowel shifts emerge as particularly salient indicators of this process. The lexical sets FACE, GOAT, and PRICE have been selected as the markers of potential levelling for this study since their historical monophthongal realisations in many Northern English varieties are well established and seen as hallmarks of Northern accents. In many traditional Northern English accents, FACE was realised as [e:], GOAT as [o:], and PRICE as [a:] (Wells 1982a, 142, 146; Wells 1982b, 365; Trudgill 2000, 68–71). However, recent studies demonstrate a shift toward diphthongisation, with FACE being increasingly pronounced as [eɪ], GOAT as [oʊ], and PRICE as [aɪ] in various urban centres (Watt 2002; Haddican et al. 2013; Strycharczuk et al. 2020). This shift is particularly relevant to accent levelling, as it represents a trend of convergence rather than the preservation of regionally distinctive variants.

Across Greater Manchester, FACE and GOAT, traditionally monophthongal, are now predominantly realised as closing diphthongs [eɪ] and [oʊ], respectively (Baranowski and Turton 2015, 4). A similar pattern is evident in Lancashire, where these vowels, alongside PRICE, were historically monophthongal or near-monophthongal but appear to be shifting toward diphthongisation, with the PRICE vowel realised as [aɪ] instead of [a:] (Trudgill 2000, 68–71).

In Sheffield, a similar change has taken place, with FACE, GOAT, and PRICE moving away from their historically monophthongal realisations and becoming predominantly diphthongal (Williams and Escudero 2014). Although the exact vowel qualities in Sheffield still diverge from those in Southern British English, this loss of traditional monophthongal realisations reflects the broader trend of dialect levelling (Williams and Escudero 2014, 2785).

Tyneside English provides further evidence of this process. FACE and GOAT were previously reported as either monophthongal ([e:] and [o:]) or as centring diphthongs ([ɪə] and

[ʊə]) (Watt 2002, 47; Wells 1982b, 375) but are now largely realised as closing diphthongs ([eɪ] and [oʊ]) (Watt 2002, 56). However, more recent research indicates ongoing variation, with some speakers still preserving monophthongal variants (Ferragne and Pellegrino 2010, 19–21).

Liverpool presents a slightly different pattern, quite dissimilar from other Northern varieties. While FACE and GOAT have long been diphthongal ([eɪ] and [oʊ]), PRICE still exhibits variation, with both monophthongal [a:] and diphthongal [aɪ] realisations depending on speaker and context (Watson 2007, 358; Cardoso 2015, 260).

The consistent pattern emerging from these regional analyses is that FACE, GOAT, and PRICE, once strongly associated with monophthongal realisations in many Northern English varieties, are now undergoing widespread diphthongisation. This shift makes them particularly suitable markers of levelling, as they exemplify the movement away from regionally distinct vowel qualities toward a more uniform Northern English vowel system. While levelling trends indicate greater homogeneity in Northern English pronunciation, particularly in urban areas, it remains to be seen whether these shifts affect all age groups and will continue to spread, or if regional variation will persist in some form.

3. Methodology

This study examines accent levelling in the speech of young adults from Northern England, a demographic particularly susceptible to phonetic change due to social mobility, dialect contact, and sociolinguistic pressures (Chambers 2004). To assess the extent of levelling, the analysis focuses on vowel realisation in the lexical sets PRICE, FACE, and GOAT, which have traditionally been monophthongal in the region (e.g., PRICE as [a:], FACE as [e:], GOAT as [o:]) but are undergoing diphthongisation, more typical of Southern English dialects. Additionally, this study explores whether young speakers align more closely with their local accents or with a more generalised Northern English variety, contributing to broader discussions on sociophonetic variation and identity.

3.1. Data

The dataset for this study was collected through an online survey designed to assess vowel realisation in the lexical sets PRICE, FACE, and GOAT. The criteria for admission of the respondents were established according to the aims of the research: the participants must have been between eighteen and thirty years old, native English speakers from Northern England, and must have completed some form of secondary education. The criterion regarding educational background was added to ensure a more homogeneous corpus overall.

The survey consisted of two parts. The first part gathered demographic information, including participants' age, place of birth, and educational background. Additionally, participants were asked to describe their accents in a short written response. The second part comprised three elicitation tasks¹ requiring participants to submit audio recordings. These tasks were specifically designed to elicit the target vowels while incorporating distractors to prevent bias in pronunciation patterns (Mummolo and Peterson, 2018). Distractors included words representing other lexical sets, such as FOOT, STRUT, START, and PALM.

Task one presented participants with definitions of words. They were asked to read the definitions aloud and provide a word they believed matched each one (e.g., *a) the front of the head, where the eyes, nose, and mouth are – ...; b) another way of saying “two times” – ...; c) to change from being open to not being open – ...*).

Task two provided a word, and participants were asked to generate at least two rhyming words (e.g., *a) hate; b) most; c) look*).

¹ While the use of elicitation tasks may not provide examples of real-life casual speech, it has been confirmed that “there is little quantitative difference” between speech samples that had been collected through sociolinguistic interviews and specifically designed elicitation tasks (Boyd et al. 2015).

Task three presented sentences with missing words. Participants read the sentences aloud, filling in the blanks with words they deemed contextually appropriate (e.g., *a) What ___ is it right now? I don't have a watch.; b) This doesn't ___ any sense to me).*

The final dataset consisted of recordings from eight participants. The speakers were selected upon their availability. As shown in Figure 2, all respondents were born in the North of England, above the linguistic boundary defined by the absence of the FOOT-STRUT and BATH-TRAP splits (Wells 1982b, 349–50).



Figure 2. Map of England demonstrating the geographical distribution of the respondents and the approximate location of the border between the linguistic South and North of England (Wells 1982b, 349-350)²

² • - respondent's place of origin; ◇ - major cities; ▲ - capital city; □ - regions of respondents' origin and residence; — - border between the linguistic South and North of England.

Participants ranged in age from twenty-two to twenty-five, with most either currently pursuing or having recently completed a bachelor's degree, as shown in Table 1. One respondent had completed college.

Speaker	Age	Place of origin	Current place of residence	Level of education
1	22	Blackpool, Lancashire	Lytham, St Anne's, Lancashire	Bachelor's degree
2	25	Blackpool, Lancashire	Blackpool, Lancashire	Bachelor's degree
3	23	Blackpool, Lancashire	Blackpool, Lancashire	Bachelor's degree
4	22	Staveley, Cumbria	Manchester, Greater Manchester	Bachelor's degree
5	22	Newcastle, Tyne and Wear	Valencia, Spain	Bachelor's degree
6	25	Preston, Lancashire	Preston, Lancashire	College
7	22	Warrington, Cheshire	Valencia, Spain	Bachelor's degree
8	22	Manchester, Greater Manchester	Manchester, Greater Manchester	Bachelor's degree

Table 1. Demographic data collected from the respondents

When asked about their accent, six participants identified it as “Northern English,” one described it as “Standard British English,” and another specified her regional accent, as seen in Table 2. The respondent who identified with her regional accent described it as “Mancunian”. Although most other participants mainly described their accents as “Northern English”, three of them mentioned having some slight regional features.

Identifying with...	Number of respondents
Northern English	6
Regional accent	1
Standard British English	1

Table 2. Respondents’ self-identification in terms of accent

3.2. Analysis design

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse vowel realisation in the lexical sets PRICE, FACE, and GOAT. Quantitative methods are widely used in sociophonetic research because they offer objective, reproducible results, making them particularly practical for larger datasets (see Brown and Wormland 2017, Leemann et al. 2017). In sociophonetics, the traditional quantitative method of analysis involves measuring formant frequencies, which can be described as acoustic data that reflect key features of vowel quality. Formants are frequency bands that correlate with aspects of vowel articulation. The first formant (F1), for instance, is inversely related to vowel height, while the second formant (F2) indicates the frontness or backness of the vowel (Ladefoged 2006). These measurements are provided in Hertz values and help assess vowel quality and thus provide insight into its pronunciation.

However, traditional formant frequency measurements, which are commonly used in vowel studies, have faced criticism. Watt (1998, 28–32) highlights several limitations of formant target models, such as variability across speakers, inconsistencies in speech rate, and difficulties in accurately capturing diphthong trajectories. While advances in software, including pitch differentiation for male and female vocal tracts and customizable Hertz range settings, have addressed some of these issues, there are still some challenges related to speech rate and vowel trajectory measurements.

Given the strengths and limitations of both approaches, this study adopts a dual-method strategy to ensure more reliable results. Moreover, the relatively small size of the dataset (eight participants)

allows for manual verification of the audio data, making qualitative analysis both feasible and valuable.

The corpus data underwent a pre-analysis filtering process to remove outliers and erroneous entries. After outlier removal, the dataset comprised a total of 998 tokens containing vowel sounds. Of these, 459 tokens represented the target lexical sets of PRICE, FACE, and GOAT.

The qualitative analysis involves a manual auditory review of 459 vowel tokens (words containing the relevant vowel in the target position within the syllable) from the lexical sets PRICE, FACE, and GOAT. Since auditory perception is inherently subjective, an inter-rater reliability check was conducted: a second reviewer, an experienced phonetician, independently analysed the same data to cross-validate the results. To maintain consistency, only monosyllabic words and words where the primary stress falls on the target vowel were included in the analysis. This restriction helps prevent interference from secondary stress patterns and ensures that vowel realisation is assessed in comparable phonetic environments.

For quantitative analysis, the audio recordings were first orthographically annotated in Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2024) and then processed using DARLA's semi-automated vowel alignment and extraction system (Reddy and Stanford 2015). This system integrates Montreal Forced Aligner (McAuliffe et al. 2017), FAVE-Extract (Rosenfelder et al. 2014), and the Vowels R package (Kendall and Thomas 2010) for segmentation and vowel formant analysis. The resulting TextGrid files were manually checked, with vowel boundaries corrected where necessary to ensure accuracy. A modified Praat script (Stanley and Lipani 2019) was then used to cross-check formant values and vowel duration measurements against DARLA's output. Finally, all extracted formant data was statistically analysed in R using the *tidyverse* package.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative analysis

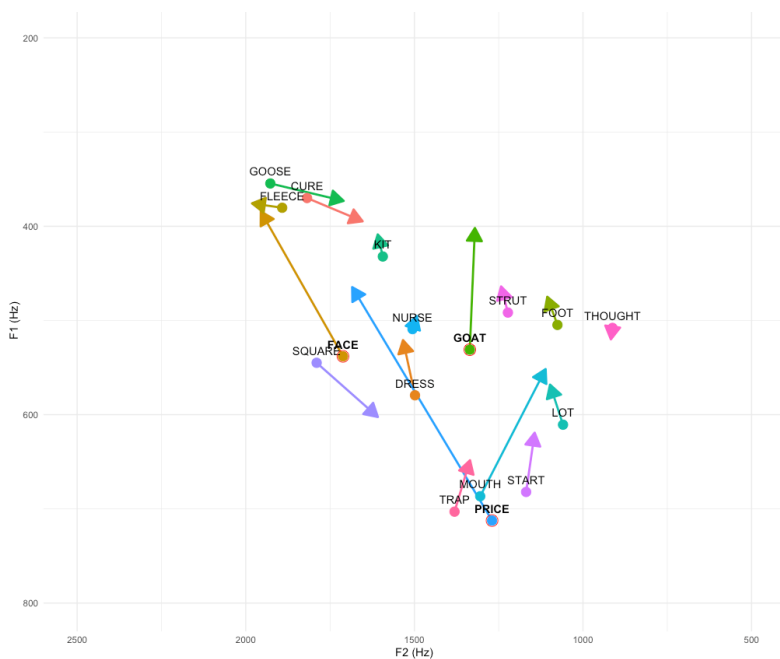
The primary aim of the quantitative analysis was to assess the diphthongal characteristics of these vowels by examining the movement of F1 and F2 formants from onglide to offglide. The trajectories of these formants were analysed to determine whether significant differences exist between the onglide and offglide positions, providing evidence for diphthongisation.

Monophthongs show little movement, as the onglide and offglide occur in the same acoustic space, reflecting the same vowel quality throughout. In contrast, diphthongs involve a shift in vowel quality from the onglide to the offglide, leading to greater movement in their formant trajectories. This occurs because diphthongs combine the characteristics of two vowels, each with its distinct formant pattern.

For example, in the PRICE diphthong /aɪ/, the onglide corresponds to the [a] vowel, which is low and back, so its formant values reflect that position (e.g., the average F1 values for this vowel range between 650-750 Hz in this dataset, and the F2 values are 1200-1300 Hz). The offglide, corresponding to [ɪ], is higher and more fronted, leading to a shift in the formant values toward a higher, more closed vowel (e.g., the average [ɪ] F1 values are 400-500 Hz, and the F2 values are generally 1600-1800 Hz for this dataset). This change in vowel quality is reflected in the movement of the formants, which can be visualised in the formant trajectories. Thus, by examining these movements, we can distinguish between diphthongs, which exhibit substantial movement, and monophthongs, which show little to no movement.

In this study, the onglide is defined as the starting point of the vowel and is measured at 20% of the vowel duration, while the offglide is measured at 80% of the vowel duration. This approach ensures that the formant values are captured at points that best reflect the transition from the initial to the final quality of the vowel.

Figure 3 illustrates the trajectories of F1 and F2 values from onglide to offglide, averaged across the respective lexical sets. The data suggests that the vowels of PRICE, FACE, and GOAT exhibit distinct diphthongal characteristics (/aɪ/, /eɪ/, and /oʊ/ respectively), especially when compared to the vectors of other vowels. The trajectories of diphthongal vowels are much longer than those of monophthongal sounds or long vowels. Thus, both FACE and PRICE are realised as definitive closing diphthongs /eɪ/ and /aɪ/, while GOAT shows less pronounced movement along the F2 axis. The target vowels are highlighted at the onglide point in Figure 3 to emphasise their starting positions.



comparing the onglide and offglide F1 and F2³ values for each phoneme. The results of these tests are as follows:

Phoneme	Statistic	P-value
FACE	10.23	4.52e-18
GOAT	13.13	2.52e-28
PRICE	18.95	2.56e-42

Table 3. F1 t-test results for PRICE, FACE and GOAT vowels

For FACE, GOAT, and PRICE, the t-tests revealed highly substantial differences between the onglide and offglide positions for F1. As shown in Table 3, the p-values for all phonemes are extremely small (< 0.001), which provides strong statistical evidence that the F1 values differ significantly between the onglide and offglide positions for each of the three target vowels. This supports the interpretation that these vowels are realised as diphthongs, as the F1 values change considerably from the onset to the offset position.

Phoneme	Statistic	P-value
FACE	-6.64	9.19e-10
GOAT	0.49	0.625
PRICE	-12.53	2.32e-25

Table 4. F2 t-test results for PRICE, FACE and GOAT vowels

Table 4 indicates that both FACE and PRICE exhibit major differences in F2, with p-values well below the 0.05 significance threshold. This further corroborates their diphthongal characterisation, as there is clear and robust F2 movement from onglide to offglide. However, GOAT does not show a statistically significant difference in F2 (p-value = 0.625), suggesting that F2 may play a less prominent role in the diphthongal realisation of this vowel compared to FACE and PRICE.

The notable F1 changes observed for all three phonemes (FACE, GOAT, and PRICE) support their classification as

³ F1 is inversely related to vowel height (higher F1 = lower vowel), while F2 is associated with vowel frontness or backness (higher F2 = front vowel).

diphthongs, as F1 exhibits substantial movement from onglide to offglide. In contrast, while F2 shows great changes for FACE and PRICE, the lack of marked movement in GOAT suggests that F2 may be less critical in defining the diphthongal nature of this vowel. However, it could also signal the possibility of GOAT being realised as a near-monophthong by some speakers in certain contexts, which could in turn account for the difference in F2 values.

4.2. Qualitative analysis

Upon transcribing the text of each audio sample, all words containing the PRICE, FACE, and GOAT vowels were highlighted. The main focus was on analysing the words that were not scripted. However, items from scripted speech were also considered if the speed of their pronunciation and sound quality allowed for accurate analysis. Words containing target vowel sounds were manually transcribed using the traditional variant of the IPA system.

4.2.1. PRICE: vowel analysis

All speakers predominantly used the diphthongal [aɪ], with some variation in articulation speed or context. Lancashire speakers, historically associated with monophthongal or near-monophthongal realisations (Trudgill 2000, 71), consistently exhibited fully diphthongal forms. One Lancashire speaker, however, pronounced some PRICE words with a vowel closer to a long vowel, with the final [ɪ] sound being somewhat faint. Upon re-evaluation, though, the vowel was concluded to be a diphthong, even though in fast speech it might appear less so.

Other notable instances include a Warrington speaker, who personally described his accent as Northern, although he added that it was “slightly Scouse,” with a broad [aɪ] that aligned with the typical Scouse pronunciation (Watson 2007, 357) and that of RP (Wells 1982a, 119). The Manchester speaker displayed the expected Mancunian diphthong [aɪ]. Speakers from Tyne and Wear and Cumbria also showed a tendency toward diphthongal realisations of PRICE.

4.2.2. FACE: vowel analysis

Diphthongal [eɪ] predominated across regions, with Lancashire speakers completely deviating from the traditional monophthongal [e:] (Trudgill 2000, 68). Some speakers produced a more typical Northern [ɛɪ] (Wells 1982b, 36–365), particularly in slower or deliberate speech. Cumbrian and Tyne and Wear speakers reflected an RP influence, moving away from regional realisations.

The Cheshire speaker primarily used the RP-like [eɪ] in the FACE set. However, a few examples in open syllables (e.g., “pay,” “may,” and “day”) showed an [ɛɪ] variant, which is typical of Scouse (Watson 2007, 357). The Manchester speaker maintained diphthongal realisations of FACE, with occasional use of [ɛɪ], aligning with broader Northern English dialects (Wells 1982b, 364–365).

4.2.3. GOAT: vowel analysis

In the GOAT lexical set, a widespread shift toward the RP diphthongal [əʊ] was observed. For example, Lancashire speakers, traditionally associated with a more open [ɔʊ] (Wells 1982b, 365), showed a strong tendency toward [əʊ], though some pronunciations like “toke” were realised with a slightly more open quality. One Lancashire speaker demonstrated a mixed approach, using [əʊ] in closed syllables and occasionally [oo] in others, possibly reflecting residual regional pronunciation influences.

The Cumbrian speaker generally adhered to [əʊ] rather than the traditional monophthongal [o:] (Trudgill 2000, 71), further underscoring a shift toward RP-like diphthongal patterns. The speaker from Newcastle also showed this pattern, with [əʊ] becoming the norm, departing from the regionally typical monophthong [o:] or centring diphthong [ʊə] (Watt and Allen 2003, 269).

The Warrington speaker predominantly used [əʊ], contrasting with Scouse’s typical [ɛʊ] (Watson 2007, 357). Manchester data demonstrated variation, with some examples of [ɔʊ] emerging alongside [əʊ]. This pattern suggests that while the Manchester accent retains some regional traits in the case of this speaker (Wells

1982b, 365; Trudgill 2000, 74), it is also influenced by more standardised English features.

4.2.4. Reliability

The second rater identified all tokens for the three lexical sets in the speech of all speakers as diphthongs, which coincided with the results of the auditory review. Thus, the inter-rater reliability was 100% regarding whether the tokens were diphthongal.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence for the ongoing process of accent levelling in the North of England, particularly among young adults. Although the study is based on a small sample size of eight respondents, the diversity of accents within the group, representing various Northern British English varieties, supports the notion that accent levelling is taking place across multiple regional dialects in the North.

The analysis of the PRICE, FACE, and GOAT lexical sets reveals that all respondents exhibited diphthongisation in these vowels, reflecting a clear shift towards a more uniform, standardised pronunciation. For instance, the PRICE vowel, traditionally realised as a monophthong [a:], was consistently pronounced as the diphthong [aɪ] by all participants, including those from regions historically associated with monophthongal forms (Trudgill 2000, 71). This trend is indicative of accent levelling and shows that speakers are reducing distinct regional features in favour of a more homogenised speech pattern. The data shows that these speakers often employed diphthongal forms typical of Standard British English, such as /eɪ/ in the FACE set and /əʊ/ or a more neutral [ɔʊ] in the GOAT words. This suggests a broader shift towards a more standardised variety, adopting the pronunciation mostly prevalent in Southern English variants.

Given that all participants are emerging adults, most of whom are currently university students or have recently been involved in higher education, this overall standardisation complements the

findings from The Sutton Trust's study (2022), which states that university students are particularly susceptible to modifying their speech in pursuit of academic and professional success. While no specific question was asked regarding participants' views on accent bias, it is noteworthy that only one participant fully identified with her regional accent ("Mancunian"), while the majority opted for the more generalised "Northern" description. These results support the hypothesis that accent levelling is linked to social mobility.

Interestingly, the participant from Manchester, who identified specifically as having a Mancunian accent, exhibited diphthongisation across all target vowels. However, she also demonstrated awareness of the FOOT-STRUT split, which she emphasised in her speech. This suggests that while the participant is adopting features associated with accent levelling, she maintains a connection to her regional identity through the use of the FOOT-STRUT distinction, which differentiates Northern English from Southern varieties.

The overwhelming self-identification of respondents with GNE further reinforces the idea of accent levelling. This indicates that young adults in the North are increasingly adopting a neutral, shared variety that transcends traditional regional markers, likely in response to social mobility, urbanisation, and the influence of Standard Southern British English as a prestige variety. Although the exact drivers behind these changes were beyond the scope of this study, exposure to higher education is likely the key factor contributing to this process.

Even though there is undeniable levelling, rather than indicating dialect loss or loss of variation in the region, these findings may instead point towards an increasing tendency of code-switching among young adults. It is more likely that in professional or formal settings, they adjust their pronunciation according to the context and continue to speak with a more marked regional variant in casual, informal environments. Further research could examine this hypothesis more comprehensively.

Given the evidence of diphthongisation and the shift towards an RP-like model, it is crucial to consider how these changes may affect other phonetic features traditionally associated with Northern

English varieties. Further research should explore how the levelling process impacts other marked phonological features, such as the FOOT-STRUT and BATH-TRAP splits, which are prototypical Northern features. Additionally, examining other lexical sets, such as NURSE, SQUARE, and CHOICE, depending on the specific dialect, could provide further insight into whether similar changes are occurring in other aspects of Northern English vowels.

While the sample size of eight participants may limit the generalisability of these findings, it is still a representative group in terms of regional variation within Northern British English. Even though this group does not represent the entire speech community, the findings can still be considered indicative of the ongoing changes, especially because the respondents were selected randomly and still produced similar results. Additionally, previous studies, such as that by Watt and Allen (2003), have successfully analysed the speech of only one speaker, showing that smaller sample sizes can still yield valuable insights into dialectal changes.

In conclusion, the findings of this paper suggest that accent levelling is present in the speech of young adults in the North of England, constituting a significant phenomenon. Although this process may not yet be complete, the evidence points to a gradual shift towards a more standardised variety of English, characterised by vowel realisations typical of Southern English dialects. Future research could expand on these findings by examining a larger sample of speakers, incorporating additional dialect features, and exploring the potential social factors that may be involved in this shift.

References

- Anttila, Arto. 2002. "Variation and Phonological Theory." *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*. Eds. J. K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers: 206-243.
- Baranowski, Maciej and Danielle Turton. 2015. "Manchester English." *Researching Northern Englishes*. Ed. Raymond

- Hickey. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins: 293–316.
- Boersma, Paul and David Weenink. 2024. *Praat: Doing Phonetics by Computer*. Version 6.4.24. Web. <<http://www.praat.org/>> [Accessed on September 20, 2024].
- Boyd, Zac, et al. 2015. “An Evaluation of Sociolinguistic Elicitation Methods.” Paper presented at the 18th International Conference of the Phonetic Sciences, Glasgow, United Kingdom, August 10–14.
- Brown, Georgina, and Wormald, Jessica. 2017. “Automatic sociophonetics: exploring corpora with a forensic accent recognition system.” *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*. 142, 422–433. doi: 10.1121/1.4991330.
- Cardoso, Amanda. 2015. *Dialectology, Phonology, Diachrony: Liverpool English Realisations of PRICE and MOUTH*. PhD thesis. University of Edinburgh.
- Cardoso, Amanda, et al. 2019. “Inter-Speaker Variation and the Evaluation of British English Accents in Employment Contexts.” *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences*. Eds. Sasha Calhoun, Paola Escudero, Marija Tabain, and Paul Warren. Melbourne, Australia, August 5-9.
- Chambers, Jack C. 2004. “Patterns of Variation including Change”. *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*. Eds. J. K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing: 349-372.
- Cheshire, Jenny, Vivian Edwards & Pam Whittle. 1993. “Non-standard English and dialect levelling.” *Real English: The grammar of English dialects in the British Isles*. Eds. James Milroy and Lesley Milroy. New York: Routledge: 53–96.
- Collier, John. 1746. *A View of the Lancashire Dialect*. Manchester: R. Whitworth.
- Coupland, Nikolas and Hywel Bishop. 2007. “Ideologised Values for British Accents.” *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 11 (1): 74–93.
- Ferragne, Emmanuel and François Pellegrino. 2010. “Formant Frequencies of Vowels in 13 Accents of the British Isles.” *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 40 (1): 1–34.

- Haddican, Bill, et al. 2013. "Interaction of Social and Linguistic Constraints on Two Vowel Changes in Northern England." *Language Variation and Change*, 25 (3): 371–403.
- International Phonetic Association. 1999. *Handbook of the International Phonetic Association: A Guide to the Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kerswill, Paul. 2003. "Dialect Levelling and Geographical Diffusion in British English." *Social Dialectology: In Honour of Peter Trudgill*. Eds. David Britain and Jenny Cheshire. Amsterdam: John Benjamins: 223–243.
- Kendall, Tyler and Erik R. Thomas. 2010. *Vowels: Vowel Manipulation, Normalization, and Plotting in R*. R package. Web. <<https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/vowels/index.html>>.
- Labov, William. 1994. *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ladefoged, Peter. 2006. *A course in phonetics*. California: Thomson Wadsworth Corporation.
- Leemann, A., Kolly, Marie-José., Britain, D. 2017. "The English Dialects App: The creation of a crowdsourced dialect corpus." *Ampersand*. doi: 10.1016/j.amper.2017.11.001.
- Levon, Erez and Susan Fox. 2014. "Social Salience and the Sociolinguistic Monitor: A Case Study of ING and TH-Fronting in Britain." *Journal of English Linguistics*, 42 (3): 185–217.
- MacKenzie, Laurel, et al. 2022. "Towards an Updated Dialect Atlas of British English." *Journal of Linguistic Geography*, 10 (1): 46–66.
- McAuliffe, Michael, et al. 2017. "Montreal Forced Aligner: Trainable Text-Speech Alignment Using Kaldi." *Proceedings of the 18th Conference of the International Speech Communication Association*.
- Mummolo, Jonathan and Erik Peterson. 2018. "Demand Effects in Survey Experiments: An Empirical Assessment." *American Political Science Review*, 113 (2): 517–529.
- Orton, Harold, et al. 1978. *The Linguistic Atlas of England*. London: Croom Helm.

- Reddy, Sravana and James Stanford. 2015. "A Web Application for Automated Dialect Analysis." *Proceedings of NAACL-HLT 2015*.
- Rosenfelder, Ingrid, et al. 2014. *FAVE (Forced Alignment and Vowel Extraction) Program Suite*. Version 1.2.2.
- Samarasinghe, Alarna N., et al. 2019. "Evaluations of Accents Can Be Used as a Measure of Prestige." *SocArXiv*.
- Stanley, Joseph and Lisa Lipani. 2019. "Automatic Formant Extraction in Praat." Web. <https://joestanley.com/downloads/191002-formant_extraction> [Accessed on October 16, 2024].
- Strycharczuk, Patrycja, et al. 2020. "General Northern English: Exploring Regional Variation in the North of England with Machine Learning." *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, 3: article 42.
- The Sutton Trust. 2022. *Accents and Social Mobility*. Web. <<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Accents-and-social-mobility.pdf>> [accessed on September 20, 2024].
- Trudgill, Peter. 1986. *Dialects in Contact*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- . 2000. *The Dialects of England*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Anonymous. c. 1690–1730. *A Lancashire Tale*. Folger Library MS V.a. 308: fols. 53v–55v. Salamanca Corpus. Produced by Javier Ruano-García.
- Anonymous. c. 1690–1730. *Robin an's Gonny....* Folger Library MS V.a. 308: fols. 55v–56r. Salamanca Corpus. Produced by Javier Ruano-García.
- Watson, Kevin. 2007. "Liverpool English." *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 37 (3): 351–360.
- Watt, Dominic. 1998. *Variation and Change in the Vowel System of Tyneside English*. PhD thesis. Newcastle University.
- Watt, Dominic and Lesley Milroy. 1999. "Variation in Three Tyneside Vowels: Is This Dialect Levelling?" *Urban Voices: Accent Studies in the British Isles*. Eds. Paul Foulkes and Gerard J. Docherty. London: Edward Arnold: 25–46.
- Watt, Dominic. 2002. "I Don't Speak with a Geordie Accent, I Speak, Like, the Northern Accent': Contact-Induced

- Levelling in the Tyneside Vowel System.” *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6 (1): 44–63.
- Watt, Dominic and William Allen. 2003. “Tyneside English.” *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 33 (3): 267–271.
- Wells, John C. 1982a. *Accents of English 1: An Introduction*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1982b. *Accents of English 2: The British Isles*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, David and Pilar Escudero. 2014. “A Cross-Dialectal Acoustic Comparison of Vowels in Northern and Southern British English.” *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 136 (5): 2751–2761.

Received: December 5, 2024

Revised version accepted: July 23, 2025