Some Lexical Incidental Pronunciations in New Zealand English

Laurie Bauer

Victoria University of Wellington

1. Introduction

This paper considers the way in which young New Zealanders pronounce a handful of individual words. That is, the focus of the paper is not on generalities concerning pronunciation, but on the way particular words are spoken by young informants in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Some of these are simply isolated words, some are words which are caught up in on-going changes, but in neither case is evidence presented here which allows secure general conclusions. There may be more general implications for some of the findings, but if there are, they will require further research to bring them out.

2. Methodology

The recordings to which reference is made in this report were made as part of a larger experiment, carried out by one of my colleagues.[1] The words of relevance for this particular report were fillers in his experiment. The words were presented in writing on the computer screen, and the informants had to read the words aloud.

All the informants were students, varying in age from 19 to 31, with a mean age of 23.6. Fourteen of them were female, eighteen were male. Information was collected on their ethnicity, educational level, and on the professions of their parents, and a socio-economic score was calculated on the basis of this information. No information on their geographic origin was collected, but all

[1] I should like to thank Paul Warren for giving me the opportunity to collect this data, for running the experiment and passing the data on to me for analysis, and for commenting on a draft version of this paper.

were speakers of New Zealand English, living in Wellington. The words of relevance for this experiment were recorded onto the computer, and the recorded files were later split into files for each individual word and played back from the computer files. For this experiment no acoustic analysis was undertaken, the analysis was purely auditory. Nineteen words were used for some speakers, eighteen for those who happened not have been given the word *white* to read out. *White* was not in the original list of words intended for this experiment, but since it has an initial <wh> which is one of the factors to be considered here, it was used as extra data.

3. Results

3.1 *Assume*

A small-scale analysis of words like *assume, presume, consume*, etc. was undertaken in the early 1980s (see the summary in Bauer 1986), and it suggested that females more than males preferred to use the /ʃ/ pronunciation: /əʃʉːm/. For a number of years this has appeared an unrealistic result, and it seemed worth checking. In this experiment, 25 of the 32 informants used an /sj/ cluster, and only 6 used /ʃ/. One used the /s/ pronunciation usually associated with American speakers, none used a /ʃj/ cluster, which can be heard from time to time. Of the six who used /ʃ/, four were male and two were female. There was no correlation with socio-economic index.

While the relatively low number of informants using /ʃ/ may be the result of the fact that most of the informants are students, we can really conclude no more here than that the pronunciation of this word is variable.

3.2 *Basic*

Basic, especially in the term *basic slag*, used to be pronounced /bæsɪk/ in New Zealand (Wall 1936: 18, 1941). This pronunciation could still be heard occasionally, even in other contexts, as late as the 1980s. However, it is no surprise that this pronunciation does not persist (at least for the word in isolation) for these young informants, all of whom maintain the vowel of *base* in *basic*.

3.3 *Earned*

For many young speakers, the verb *earn* conjugates like *learn*, so that the past tense or past participle form is /ɜːnt/. Here the informants were presented with a written form which contained a final <d>, and correspondingly most of the informants pronounced a /d/. In free performance, we might expect rather more /t/ pronunciations. However, one informant clearly used /t/ and two used devoiced /d/ s with the vowel length that suggested a /d/ but no voicing in the plosive.

3.4 *Manuka*

In Maori, *manuka* has a long first vowel, and a short second and third vowels (Williams 1971), and thus carries stress on the first syllable (Bauer 1993: 557). If this were carried across to English, we would expect to find /ˈmaːnʊkə/ or similar (Wall 1941). Instead, all but one of the informants pronounced this word /məˈnʉːkə/. The exceptional informant was a Pakeha, not a Maori. The discussion in Wall suggests that the majority pronunciation here has been well-established for over sixty-years, and it does not appear to have been influenced by the current trend for more 'Maori-like' pronunciations of Maori loan words.

3.5 *Maroon*

There is a pronunciation /məˈrʌun/ occasionally heard in New Zealand, though Deverson (1997) marks it as being an Australian pronunciation. However, only one of the informants used this pronunciation, the others either using the British form /məˈrʉːn/ or putting a full vowel /æ/ in the first syllable.

3.6 Yod-dropping following <n>

New Zealanders variably drop the 'yod' sound following an /n/, frequently, for example, saying /nʉː ziːlənd/ rather than the version with the yod, /njʉː ziːlənd/. The yod seems to disappear more easily in some words than in others. I chose to consider two where I knew the yod to be variable in New Zealand: *nudist* and *nuisance*. However, it turned out that the yod was always present for my informants in the word *nuisance*, much to my surprise, since I have heard

students dropping yod in this word. *Nudist* almost went the other way. Only four informants maintained the yod in this word. All those who maintained the yod (presumably the conservative option in this word) were male.

If we believe that phonetic change starts with the most frequent words, and moves gradually through the rarer words, it is perhaps unexpected that *nudist* should lose the yod before *nuisance*. However, we probably have to consider that *nude* and *nudist* act together to form a word-family which acts as a single block as far as the application of the yod-dropping rule is concerned, thus boosting the size of the target group, and making the loss of yod more likely in this word.

While there is a general adoption of various forms of yod-dropping in English, both in New Zealand and more widely, the evidence from these two words does not provide a great deal of evidence on the progress of this change. It simply provides a snapshot of different levels of yod-dropping in two unrelated items, and suggests that a major study of the subject would provide information of interest.

3.7 *Project*

The item *project* was presented without any context, and it was thus possible that informants would treat it as a verb and stress it on the second syllable. None of them did, they all stressed the first syllable. Seven of the informants used the LOT vowel in the first syllable, the other 25 using the GOAT vowel (I use Wells's 1982 lexical sets to name particular vowels). Five of the seven informants who used the LOT vowel were male, and the speakers who used LOT tended to have a fairly high socio-economic score (139.1 as opposed to an overall average of 121.4 for all the speakers, with a range of individual scores for all speakers from 72 to 179). However, there was no direct linking of socio-economic score and pronunciation on the individual level.

3.8 Vocalisation of /l/

The word *milk* was considered to see what degree of /l/-vocalisation is found in this group of informants. *Milk* is not a neutral word in this context: it is frequent, the /l/ is pre-consonantal and the combination of KIT and /l/ in this context frequently gives rise to a single vowel rather than the diphthong which might be

expected with other vowels. In other words, *milk* is probably at the forefront of the shift to vocalisation, and accordingly cannot be considered to give an accurate picture of the state of /l/-vocalisation in general: the results here simply refer to the word *milk*. Since a single token was analysed for each speaker, it is not even clear how representative the results are for the speakers involved. Tokens of several different words are available in the same data set, but a full analysis of all of them goes beyond the intent of this paper.

Vocalisation is notoriously difficult to hear on tape, and the distinction between clear and dark is bound to be rather subjective, and correspondingly this was the most difficult of the words in this experiment to code. Nevertheless, the general trend of results seems clear.

The big surprise here is how little /l/-vocalisation there was in the recordings. Only ten of the informants provided a token in which there was judged to be no lateral [l] sound. I believe that this is a matter of a particular sociolect: humanities students seem particularly prone to retaining a lateral – especially in formal contexts – where many of their compatriots do not. This suggestion is strengthened by the fact that several of the informants appeared to have a relatively clear [l] in the word *milk*, a form which is usually considered to be hypercorrect. Thus this result can probably be taken to be the result of the single-word presentation and reading style that is elicited by this particular experimental technique. The average socio-economic score for those providing vocalised /l/ was 115.8, which is slightly below the average for these informants.

3.9 <wh>

Although a distinction between the pronunciation of <wh> words and <w> words is often said to have persisted longer in New Zealand than in many places, Wellington is today largely an area in which no distinction is made. The expectation is thus that the majority of speakers will use /w/ in <wh> words, and this expectation was met. However, two points seemed worth further consideration: (i) do all <wh> words behave the same way, or is there some evidence of lexical diffusion in the loss of a distinctive <wh> pronunciation? (ii) are lexical and grammatical words treated the same way?

Some years ago, I suggested (Bauer 1986: 229) that the word *wharf* was one where the distinctive <wh> pronunciation is lacking in New Zealand English. In this

experiment, *wharf* was contrasted with the words *whale* and *whim* and, for those speakers for whom the word was recorded, the word *white*. All speakers used /w/ in *wharf*; there were six distinctive <wh> pronunciations for *whale*, two for *whim*, and just one for *white*, but over only thirteen recordings. Thus the individual lexeme involved does seem to determine to some extent the likelihood of a distinctive <wh> pronunciation. There are at least two possible hypotheses here: either we have an instance where the more common word is more resistant to the loss of the <wh> pronunciation, or it is the existence of a contrasting form *Wales* which leads to the retention of the distinctive pronunciation of *whales*.

The word *which* was also recorded, to give a grammatical <wh> word. In these instances it was not always clear whether a speaker was or was not using a non-/w/-pronunciation of the word, but I recorded six speakers who definitely or probably did. There was no constant implication that speakers who use something other than /w/ in one of the lexical terms will also use it in *which*. It seems that the retention of a distinction between <w> and <wh> words is as common in grammatical words as in the particular lexical words where it is most common. It may or may not be coincidental that in both those cases there are minimal pairs in which the <wh> and the <w> are potentially contrasted. It must be recalled that the experimental method is likely to have elicited very formal pronunciations, and that in normal speech a greater degree of reduction to /w/ should be expected.

3.10 *With*

The Scottish and northern English pronunciation of *with* has a final voiceless fricative, /θ/, while the southern English version has a voiced fricative /ð/. Further, in recent times the dental fricatives have been replaced by labio-dental fricatives in many southern English varieties, and these pronunciations are also heard in New Zealand, though not frequently in the socio-economic group to which the informants for this experiment seem to belong (Wood 2003). Thus, in principle, we have four possible pronunciations for *with*: with a final /θ/, /ð/, /f/ or /v/. It might be expected that with so much possible variation, we might find the voiced fricatives particularly frequently in voiced environments, so the word *without* was also recorded for comparison. The results are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Results for *with* and *without*

	With	*Without*
ɬ	21	20
ð	9	12
f	1	0
v	1	0

Interestingly, there were only two instances of a speaker using a voiceless fricative for *with* but a voiced one for *without*; otherwise everyone used either voiceless for both words or voiced for both words. Nobody used voiceless in *without* and voiced in *with*.

Clearly there is variation here, though it is not clear whether the variation is stable or whether it indicates change, and if so in which direction. The average socio-economic score for those using /ð/ in *with* is 113.8, as opposed to an average of 122.4 for those with /θ/, (the averages are even closer for *without*) which suggests that /θ/ might be the conservative and prestige value, but this does not entirely fit with my observations of other students over the past few years, so I am slightly dubious about the value of this measure here, given how close the values for the two conditions are.

Wood (2003) gives more detail, especially with relation to the use of labiodentals in *with* and other words, but for a different geographic region and a different socio-economic class. It seems that a fuller investigation might yield some useful information on the way in which this innovation is spreading.

3.11 *Worry*

There are several words in English written with an <o> but pronounced with the STRUT vowel or with variation in the pronunciation between the LOT vowel and the STRUT vowel: words like *colour, other, monk; accomplish, constable, mongrel* and for some English speakers, *nothing* and *one*. Most of the cases where there is variation have a nasal following the vowel, but *worry*, which does not fit this general pattern, seems to be joining the set. The use of the STRUT vowel is still the default here, but increasing use of the LOT vowel can be heard, Sean Plunkett being an example of a public figure who uses the LOT vowel in this word. Eleven

of the 32 informants used the LOT vowel in this word, and for another two it was not entirely clear that they had used STRUT. This is quite a high number to be using an in-coming variant in such formal surroundings, and the success of the LOT vowel here can presumably be put down to the support of the orthography so that *worry* patterns like *sorry* instead of like *curry*. It would be possible to undertake an acoustic analysis of the vowel in *worry* to see if it is becoming exactly like that in *sorry*, but as long as it is perceptually like that in *sorry*, the category shift has presumably taken place.

4. Conclusion

Although the data for this experiment comes from 32 speakers, a relatively large number as these things go, the informants are probably relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status, and care should be taken in extending the observations made here to 'New Zealand English' as an undifferentiated entity. Nevertheless, the degree of variation in words like *with* and *worry* is indicative of on-going changes in New Zealand English, and the relative lack of variation in *assume, basic, manuka, nuisance* helps fill in the picture about the way in which New Zealand English is changing or has changed. With the word *milk* there was great deal of phonetic variation in the renditions of this word, but the amount of resistance to /l/-vocalisation, even in this social group, is a healthy reminder that not all New Zealanders speak the kind of New Zealand English we find it interesting to describe.

References

Bauer, Laurie 1986. Notes on New Zealand English phonetics and phonology. English World-Wide 7: 225-258.

Bauer, Winifred 1993. Maori. London and New York: Routledge.

Deverson, Tony (ed.) 1997. The New Zealand Pocket Oxford Dictionary. Auckland: Oxford University Press.

Wall, Arnold 1936. The Mother Tongue in New Zealand. Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed.

Wall, Arnold 1941 [1939]. New Zealand English: How it should be spoken. 2nd edn. Christchurch: Whitcome & Tombs.

Wells, J.C. 1982. Accents of English. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, Herbert W. 1971 [1844]. A Dictionary of the Maori Language. 7th edn. Wellington: Government Printer.

Wood, Elizabeth 2003. TH-fronting: the substitution of f/v for θ/ð in New Zealand English. New Zealand English Journal 17: 50-56.