

London calling (or cooling?)

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The finding that gradience and fine-grained phonetic variation are pervasive has led to two opposing reactions with respect to phonological representations. On the one hand, it has been argued that phonological representations should be enriched with phonetic detail. On the other hand, there is an emerging tendency to reduce phonological representations to their contrastive minimum (see e.g. Iosad 2013) but to enrich the phonetics-phonology interface instead. The prediction made by the second approach is that phonetic detail is invisible to categorical phonological computation. This talk aims to support this approach by looking at a change in progress which shows rich phonetic variation but results in categorical phonological change.

More precisely, this talk looks at phonological restructuring in London English (spreading across Southern England), triggered by the well-documented fronting of /u:/, which is suspended or weakened before tautosyllabic /l/ (see e.g. Strycharczuk & Scobbie 2016). This failure to front before /l/ leads to an approximation of – and possible merger with – /ɔ:/, which undergoes raising: *cool* and *call* may become homophonous [kʊ:] (note that this variety also has /l/-vocalisation). Closer analysis of a sample of London speakers reveals a more complex – and quite rapid – development, however, in which phonetic approximation leads to phonological neutralisation, which lexicalises as a merger, then causing a phoneme split, in four stages:

1. Gradient backing of /u:/ before tautosyllabic /l/ but not in morphologically derived forms:

COOLING ≠ COOL ≠ CALL, CAUGHT

2. Neutralisation of the COOL-CALL contrast, but not in morphologically derived forms:

COOLING ≠ COOL = CALL, CAUGHT

3. Neutralisation also in morphologically derived forms, thus merger of COOL-CALL words:

COOLING = COOL, CALL, CAUGHT

4. The COOL-CALL merger persists, but CAUGHT words become distinct, leading to a phoneme split:

COOLING, COOL, CALL ≠ CAUGHT

We can thus see that what starts as gradient (phonetic) change culminates in a series of categorical (phonological) changes. I will show that each step or stage of this process is motivated by properties of the phonological system of London English and independently occurring changes in that system (for which see e.g. Kerswill et al. 2008). Moreover, the process plays out somewhat differently in the Home Counties (the London commuter belt), which again is a consequence of the properties of the phonological system in terms of contrast and categorical processes. In a framework of phonetically enriched representations, though, each of these steps would be stipulative, as would any account of the differences between London and the Home Counties. I will thus provide a formal analysis of the phonological changes underlying the rich variation observable on the surface, combining contrastive privative features with an autosegmental model of feature organisation.