Joined up thinking:

new ways to analyse old variables

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It's common practice, when planning a research project, to read the methodologies of others and, using their experiences, build your own approach in order to collect suitable data. Whilst this maximises comparability across studies, datasets, and linguistic varieties, it is possible that following the work of others may result in the entrenching of methodologies and assumptions which aren't appropriate from one variety to another.

Using spoken language data from Mersea Island, an East Anglian variety located off the coast of South-East England, this presentation will explore two such cases – changes to the diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ (e.g. in words such as 'high' and 'house'), as well as the effects of distribution on word-final t/d deletion (e.g. 'craft' and 'land'). What these two analyses show us is that it is important to research historical evidence when tracking the development of your variables over time, and that we must take into account certain phonological constraints on the distribution of our variables.

With respect to diphthongal development, Britain (2008) demonstrates, that previously proposed models of change for the /ai/ and /au/ diphthongs (such as those presented by Wells 1982) cannot be supported by the historical variants present for his data. This is also true of the Mersea data, resulting in a re-modelling of change in this variety, and highlighting the importance of being guided by our own dialect-specific analyses, as opposed to relying on generalised representations.

In contrast, the methodological implications resulting from a re-analysis of t/d deletion do not relate to historical developments, rather a greater need to develop understandings across levels of language analysis. Indeed, following Amos etal (fc), this presentation will highlight that, when taken from a phonological perspective, the traditional pairing of (t d) as a singular variable (leading to hierarchies such as that presented by Labov 1989:90) do not reflect the differing distribution and behaviour of these sounds, leading to, one could argue, inaccurate conclusions of the variable patterns.

Finally, the role of social factors upon language variation will be considered due to the contrasting behaviour of both sets of variables. For example, while diphthong variation exhibits fairly classic sociolinguistic patterning regarding age and gender, no social factors were reported as significant in statistical tests for (t) or (d) deletion. This comparison, once again, reinforces the difference between linguistic variation and sociolinguistic variation, and how the status of these may, themselves, vary across speech communities.