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"The Impact of the Educational Background on the Bristolian Accent: A Case Study"

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**Abstract:** This paper sets out to discuss the subject matter of the impact of the educational background on the Bristolian accent, this is, to present a case study. To this purpose, ten natives from the city of Bristol have been selected in order to determine to what extent they show dialectal features in unconscious speech. In particular, the study intends to shed light on the following questions: (1) What meaningful characteristics of the Bristolian dialect are kept in unconscious speech and (2) what is Bristolian educated people's identity towards their native dialect? In order to do so, the recordings gathered from the participants have been analysed following O'Connor and Fletcher (1999:16), Ramírez (2015), (Vinny and Stoke 2014) and Langer (2011).

**Keywords:** West Country English dialect, varieties of English, English phonology, sociolinguistics.

**Felipe RAMÍREZ CASTELLANOS**

**The Impact of the Educational Background on the Bristolian Accent: A Case Study**

## **0. Introduction**

Every single person in the British Isles is able to recognize the West Country dialect the moment they hear it. Its strong personality and phonological characteristics give it away on the same instant someone pronounces the typical "lush" or "ow bist?" (Vinny and Stoke 63-70) This "distinctly warm-sounding" dialect is commonly referred to, par excellence, as Bristolian—named Bristle or Brizzle by the native people of the area—this is, the one that

summarizes and possesses most of the unique characteristics of the West Country dialect and is more widely spread throughout the region of Devon and around the city of Bristol. (Vinny and Stoke 6- 7). The West Country dialect is spread throughout the counties of Gloucestershire, Somerset, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Dorset, Devonshire and Cornwall, being, as said, most easily recognized and concentrated around the area of Somerset (Bristol especially; See Appendix, Fig. 1.).

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the field of sociolinguistics and the topic of international English (Canagarajah 110), however, many minor dialects of English remain unstudied; in this case, there is very little research on the Bristolian accent and dialect of the southwest of England, its identity and evolution through time. The main research on this topic varies from articles on newspapers, interviews and certain comments and references to specific points on books which compare Brizzle to RP (Received Pronunciation) and the main one are workshops taken place at the University of Bristol guided by Langer (2011) which deal with the sociolinguistics of Bristol at a very general level. This study is also partially based on a previous research conducted on Bristolian and presented as the final dissertation of my degree in English Studies. In other words, there is little, if none, sociolinguistic research carried out regarding the Southwest of England, therefore, the remaining issue is to find what is its impact on people's identity and evolution through time.

The purpose of this paper is to try to find out whether the Bristolian accent, considered culturally foolish, is ameliorated in public environments by people with an educational background, to focus on the most frequent phonetic changes people avoid in socially educated contexts and to analyze whether the concept of the Bristolian identity changes in Bristolians with an educational background. There seems to be a reluctance towards these types of minority dialects in public educated contexts, therefore the hypothesis formulated for this paper is Bristolian people with an educational background try to hide specific features of their Bristolian way of speaking to a more standardized manner in educated contexts. In order to try to answer the hypothesis and fulfil the objectives, the research questions posed are as follows: What meaningful characteristics of the Bristolian dialect are kept in unconscious speech and what is Bristolian educated people's identity towards their native dialect?

This paper is organized in five sections, the first one, formerly described, is the Introduction, which is tailed by the Methodology section in which I will explain the procedure to be followed for this research paper, which is based on a previous research and its bibliography, explaining the variables, participants and the methodology followed. Continuing with the explanation of the Theoretical Background on which the Analysis and Discussion of Data will be based (transcriptions, comparison and discussion) through means of graphs, which will lead to a conclusion.

## **1. Methodology**

In this section, the subjects, the procedure and the way the data will be analysed will be presented as to show the methodology to be followed for this case study.

The subjects that took part in this study consisted of ten native people who were born and currently live in the city of Bristol with ages ranging from 17 to 19, studying at the moment at a tertiary level (BA) and finding themselves at an undergraduate level of studies of the bachelor in English, history and sociology. The reasons for approaching tertiary Bristol students of English linguistics were threefold as it was assumed that these students are highly trained and proficiently skilled in English language and uphold a sense of professionalism and integrity in their responses. Secondly, these students could be future university professors, therefore, they should be aware of how they speak and what utterances and pronunciation they possess, and thirdly, they show a fresher view of the situation as they have recently started university and show the new generation's view of the panorama.

This study used a set of recordings gathered from free speech which was recorded along the years between 2004 and 2011 in two different situations by considering two variables. The first variable included some sub-variables, afore described, as the participant's native language, cultural background and place of residence and age. All participants are tertiary English (Bristolian) students. The second variable referred to the intention purported through the recordings, that is, the participants had to show a relaxed way of speaking, this is, not limited or that which felt apparently controlled so their way of speaking would not vary due to the feeling of being examined and analysed in detail; students were expected to use their natural way of speaking in a relaxed manner. Some parts of the recordings nevertheless were instances which the participants were asked to read aloud both in their common way of speaking and in the pure Bristolian dialect. The amount of total time of all the data from the recordings sums up one hour of output from native Bristolian citizens. Two of the people were recorded at their home and the rest were recorded at the BBC Bristol Radio Studios of the city of Bristol through the means of an interview "BBC Voices: Conversation in Bristol about Accents, Dialects and Attitudes to Language." However, some limitation could come from the data gathered, this is, only one hour of natural speech will not show all the possible shifts and variables in phonetics and phonology which could be analysed, and which may occur in natural life conversations. However, the two gradients show a very relaxed manner of speaking from the native's house and a more educated setting which is portrayed at the BBC studios.

Ten tertiary students from the department of English of the University of Bristol were invited to take part in interviews regarding attitudes to language, their native identity and some dialectal features of *Brizzle*, participants were asked to give permission for the investigator to use the information gathered only for research purposes. The data was collected through the means of a recorder. Although the names, age group, gender and studies of each participant was provided, these have been kept anonymous for the analysis. However, considering these variables could lead to further research. The questions were specific and clear regarding language, identity and beliefs and encouraged participants to dwell on their language and opinions towards it. The aim of the study was to find out whether the participants change their way of speaking from Bristolian to a more standardized type of language in public spheres and which dialectal features they keep; if these are controlled or simply vary unnoticed from an intrinsic and automatic process of speech.

For the analysis of the data of this corpus of recordings, the following procedure has been applied, this is, a quantitative research method has been followed to try to come out with frequencies through the means of graphs of the most common dialectal features which have been selected and presented in the *Literature Review* section. Adding up, the responses to language attitudes have also been taken into account in a qualitative method of research to enlighten the results gathered in the quantitative analysis.

## 2. Theoretical Background

*"Language is inherently inlaid in culture, therefore, a means of being aware of cultural peculiarities in communication"*  
(Vygotsky 1978 qtd. in Dunworth 2002).

There has been little research in sociolinguistics as to what minority dialects refer to, this is, not only little research has been dedicated to the Bristolian dialect, but also to other non-standard such as *Geordie*, *Brummie* or the dialect of Yorkshire. Nonetheless, other more known worldwide due to external reasons do show a greater percentage of analysis and study dedicated to them such as Cockney or African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Newspapers such as the Guardian or the BBC News are constantly publishing articles regarding Cockney in education, slang or the way it is perceived by society (BBC Education 2001; Jacot 2014). Still very little research has been developed regarding education. On the other hand, more extended and famous dialects, such as AAVE do have been investigated in academic fields, which is relevant to this study as to how this has been done. Loflin and Guyette (3) analysed how the AAVE changed due to an expansion in the education of their students. They conducted their study under the claim that "considerable evidence of grammatical difference between the speech of Blacks and whites had been adduced since the former showed a especially high concentration of non-standard features. In order to survey such features, they organised a set of recordings in live natural speech. Their outcomes analysed and showed how after years of education, such affected the way their students spoke and that certain features changed to some extent, although differences remained.

On the other hand, dialects, at a general level, have been dedicated more research regarding education. This is, dialects have been analysed in terms of changes due to education without concentrating on a particular one. This is the case of Snell and Andrews (1) who carried out a research at the University of Leeds, UK, to analyse to what extent a regional dialect and accent, non-standard, had an impact on the development of the education of their students. One of the main outcomes showed that the curricula had marginalised language variations although this not showed an important impact on education since young people were able to style-shift between standard and non-standard forms. This study directly relates to country and analysis to what is being analysed throughout this paper, although the research here has been narrowed down to further extent.

Other studies portrayed similar outcomes at wider different settings such as other European countries as the Netherlands (Yao and Ours 2014), United States (McDavid 1966),

or around the world and their vernacular tongues and dialects in education by the UNESCO in Africa, Asia or Russia (UNESCO 1949).

Still, this data clarifies the gap found here, where, although the impact of dialects has been studied to some extent in educational context, specific and narrowed dialects have not. Therefore, basing this study on the previous research in the field and analysing the data by means of the phonetic alphabet provided by O'Connor and Fletcher (16; See Appendix, Fig. 2) in their book *Sounds English: A Pronunciation Practice Book* and the research on specific features of *Brizzle* carried out two years ago at the Complutense University of Madrid (Ramírez 11-15) the Bristolian dialect will be analysed as described.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion of Data

Having already specified the aims, hypotheses, research questions, our methodology and background literature for the analysis, such will be provided to try to show and answer the research questions previously set out. Only the features of speech (in phonetics) considered more relevant and characteristic, intrinsic to Bristolian (Ramírez 2015), in the speech of the participants have been analysed. These are as follows:

Vowels:

1. As in the northern parts of England, the Bristolian dialect shows an overuse of the vowel /ʊ/ which is normally used to substitute other vowel sounds such as the little hut /ʌ/, the long /ɔ:/ or the schwa /ə/ and diphthongs such as /ou/. An example of this phenomenon is in the word chocolate (Stoke and Green 34) which is pronounced as /tʃɒklət/, and one taken from the recordings "know" pronounced as /nʊ/.
2. The falling of the schwa /ə/ when in between consonants, no matter which. For instance, the names Bristol and Cornwall, respectively /brɪzl/ and /kɜ:rnɪl/.

Consonants:

3. Dental voiceless consonants turn into /j/ as in "restaurant" pronounced /'rɛsfə.rɒŋ/.
4. The sound /h/ always drops at the beginning of a word, causing therefore, the shortening of such word (Langer 9) (Stoke and Green 13). For example: "Heart attack" will be said as /'ɑ:ræk/.
5. The glottal stop<sup>1</sup> may also be found and is very common to come across in words such as "dentist", "butter" or "rotten" where the /t/ is inside the word.
6. The /l/ sound however has an additional characteristic, and it is that Bristolian people often add it at the end of a word or in the middle when it is followed by a vowel or preceded by it. This also happens when the next word begins in a vowel (Green 13). "Idea" becomes /aɪ'diə:l/.

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<sup>1</sup> Pertaining to, or produced in, the glottis. Glottal catch (also stop), a sound produced by the sudden opening or shutting of the glottis with an emission of breath or voice ("Glottal stop").

7. The sounds /ð/ and /θ/ (O'Connor and Fletcher 1999:16) usually tend to change into an /f/ sound as in the word "think" usually pronounced /fɪnk/.

Other features were showed such as dialectal phrases and expressions ("safe him up", "chav"), taken from the recordings and also mentioned in Stoke and Green (34), omission of the /t/ sound as in "it's", pronounced /ɪs/ or the change of the /æ/ sound into/e/; however, these were not analysed in this paper for they only appeared once in the amount of data gathered and were not relevant for the frequencies. Nonetheless, they do open the research for further study.

Therefore, with this set of features to be analysed the first research question arises as to which meaningful characteristics of the Bristolian dialect are kept in natural relaxed speech. For the purpose of showing this outcome a table and a graph have been created.

According to the National Center for Voice and Speech (2017) the average words per minute a person produces is 130wpm. In base to the amount of words produce summing up the hour of recordings gathered, this leaves us with a total of 7.800 words to be analysed. Out of this amount of words produced only the ones with dialectal features have been selected. The result is shown in TABLE 1 (See Appendix, Fig. 3), in which we find the main dialectal features that have been counted throughout the whole script of speeches. In it, as stated previously at the beginning of this section, features 1 and 2 constitute the vowel sounds and, 3 to 7 the consonant sounds analysed. This leaves us with a number of 298 cases in which the participants uttered a dialectal feature intrinsic to their native dialect of Bristol. Summing up the frequencies and placing them visually, GRAPH 1 (See Appendix, Fig. 4) has been created.

As shown in GRAPH 1, 7502 words of the total uttered remained Standard British English while only 298 let through their precedence. However, the limitation of the intonation also affecting the speech should be considered and it is not portrayed here. In terms of percentages, only 3,82% of the time, this is, of an hour, the participants showed a Bristolian dialect and pure accent, probably unaware of it, as one states "I don't really know what my accent sounds like" during the interview at the BBC Bristol Studios ("Conversation"). A total of 96,18% of the speech and time, the participants sounded, most of time, taking into the account the characteristics that have not been taken into account, neutral to some extent, or, if possible, to mention, standard.

An illustrative answer has been provided therefore, as the speech gathered is natural and relaxed, the output provided by the participants is to some extent unconscious, due to this, regarding the first research question, it can be stated that Bristolians try to hide specific features of their Bristolian way of speaking to a more standardized manner, although still showing through intrinsic unconscious traits of their native way of speaking in educated contexts; in other words, their origin is still recognizable.

As to the second research question, which is Bristolian educated people's identity towards their native dialect, the participants stated along the interview and the recordings various answers which lead all to a common conclusion. Some of them claimed to have a "twinge" of accents, standard and Bristolian, some described their situation as not sounding

"really Bristolian", another affirmed that it had a "quite lot of stigma and a rustic connotation", in general, all agreed to the prejudice given to the dialect and accent of the area of Bristol, Devon, which may affect them to some extent in their lives. Nonetheless, they all were agreed in the conclusion that they were not ashamed of sounding truly Bristolian, they were proud of their origins, it proclaims, "unity and a sense of identity" and something to be proud of ("Conversation").

#### **4. Conclusion**

Contemplating all this, according to Stoke and Green, Bristolian is a "distinctly warm-sounding" dialect (6). Due to the fact that the city is a continuous come and go of tourists and students that come to university, this is, a "melting pot", therefore, the Bristol dialect is quickly "diluting" the identity of the city (Langer 1). People constantly try to hide it or soften it because of social reasons.

It is known and spread, as Halliwell claims (61), that the West Country dialect, specially the Bristolian one is a signature of a lack of education, as he says in his book, even in literature: "Numerous examples of the Somersetshire dialect are to be found in old plays, in which country characters are frequently introduced [...]" (Halliwell 61).

To conclude, throughout the past four sections, the purpose of this research to find out whether the Bristolian accent is ameliorated in public environments by people with an educational background and to focus on the most frequent phonetic changes people avoid in socially educated contexts as well as analyzing whether the concept of the Bristolian identity changes in Bristolians with an educational background, has been tried to be fulfilled through the means of a specific method supported by background literature to later analyze and discuss the results obtained to illustrate the answer. Several findings and come outs have been provided. Although there seems to be a reluctance towards these types of minority dialects in public educated contexts, hypotheses formulated at the beginning of this paper: Bristolian people with an educational background try to hide specific features of their Bristolian way of speaking to a more standardized manner in educated contexts, has been to an extent confirmed. As the results showed, native speakers of the area ameliorate their accent, though unconsciously in public spheres and claimed that it varied depending on context.

The objectives have guided the investigation by means of the research questions posed which have shown what meaningful characteristics of the Bristolian dialect and were kept in free speech and what is Bristolian educated people's identity towards their native dialect, leaving as a result a strong sense of origin though a more standard manner in the way of speaking to avoid stigma. The results and discussion obtained from this analysis leave open many different lines of further research into the "areal" of Bristol and its surrounding in terms of identity and to what education refers which could be extended to other parts of the country as was stated in the Theoretical Background.

A definitive conclusion deriving from many different research following this line could lead to a change in education systems and the identity of the citizens of the Southwest of England aiming at secondary and tertiary education levels which could deal with the

problems having to do with the stigma and the reception in public spheres of the natives from the county.

To carry a further study down this line of research, more data should be gathered and a more in depth analysis should be carried out with more variables and more participants of different age groups, education levels and, it would also be interesting to analyse such results in terms of gender, female and male, to carry out a comparison. The main limitations are due to the amount of time provided and limit regarding the length of the paper, many more transcripts of complete recordings with the exact amount of words would provide a clearer analysis, therefore the results shown in this research paper are merely illustrative and clarify the gap found in the area of sociolinguistics dealing with minor dialects.

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## Appendix

**Fig. 1. Map of southwestern dialectal varieties**



**Fig. 2. Phonetic alphabet by O'Connor and Fletcher (14).**

<b>Sound</b>	<b>Key word</b>	<b>Sound</b>	<b>Key word</b>
s	so	ə	again
z	zoo	i:	see
ʃ	shop	ɪ	if
ʒ	pleasure	e	egg
tʃ	chin	æ	hand
dʒ	judge	ʌ	up
f	five	ɒ	hot
v	voice	ɔ:	saw
θ	thin	əʊ	home
ð	this	u:	food
p	pen	ʊ	put
b	bad	ɜ:	bird
t	tea	ɑ:	car
d	did	eɪ	page
k	cat	ɪə	near
g	get	eə	there
l	leg	aɪ	five
r	ring	ɔɪ	boy
j	yes	aʊ	now
w	wet		
m	me		
ŋ	thing		
n	no		
h	hand		

**Fig. 3. Table of results (TABLE 1)**

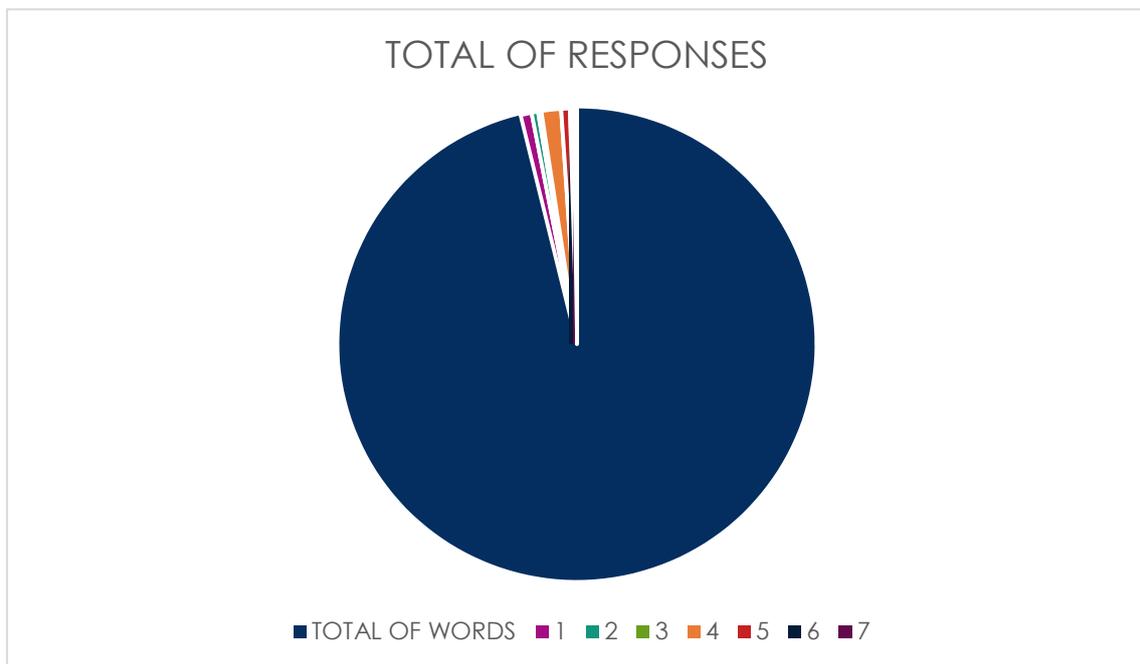
**TABLE 1**

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>NUMBER OF DIALECTAL FEATURES</b>	59	34	18	104	46	18	19

<b>TOTAL OF DIALECTAL FEATURES SHOWN</b>	298 Dialectal features from Bristolian
<b>TOTAL OF WORDS</b>	7800 words (Standard + Bristolian)

**Fig. 4. Graph of results (GRAPH 1)**

**GRAPH 1**



**Bioprofile of the author**

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