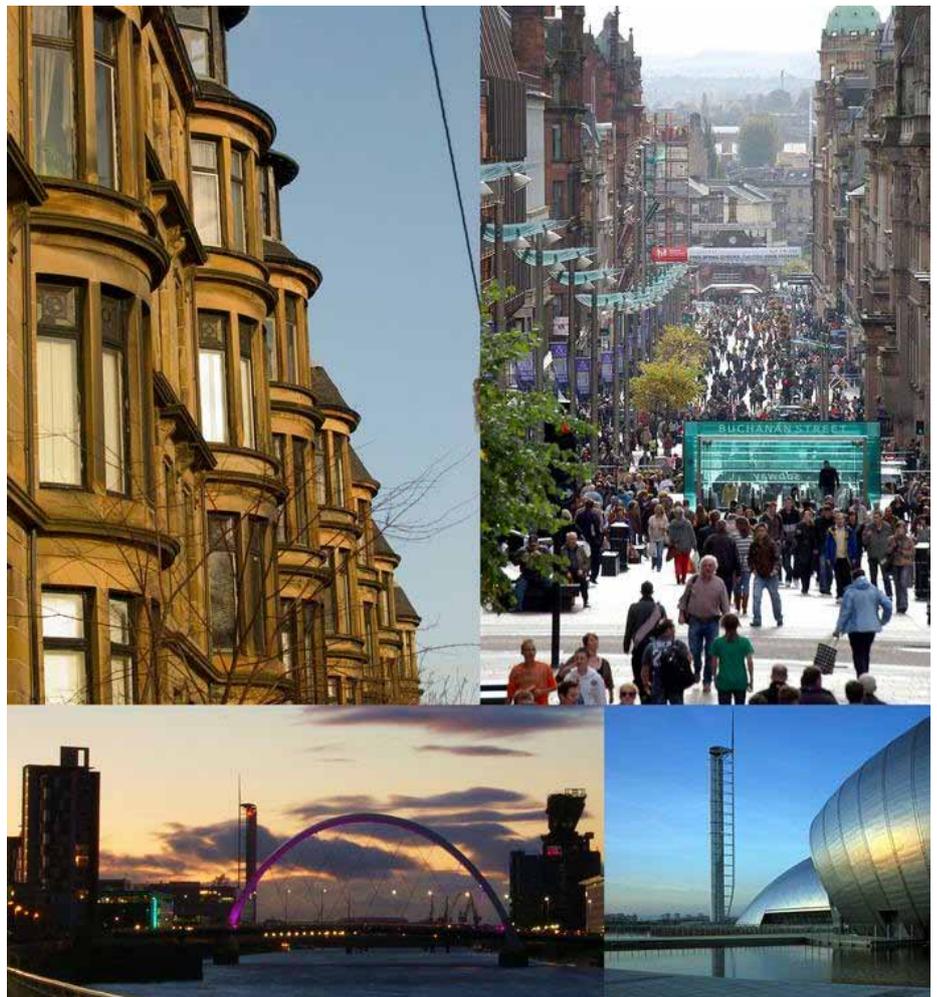

The Leverhulme Trust

Awards in Focus

Fine phonetic variation and sound change: a real-time study of Glaswegian

Anyone having to deal with the spelling of English will have encountered traces of sound changes that have taken place in the past: we no longer pronounce 'k' in knife, or 'gh' in night. Sound changes in progress may also be noticeable as variable pronunciations favoured by younger speakers: for example, the use of 'f' for 'th' in words like think, a stigmatised consonant change rapidly spreading through British urban accents. This fine-grained phonetic variability, much well below the level of awareness, is a prerequisite for sound change. But despite being able to trace the outcome of changes over time in written historical records, and being able to observe variation in speech in very great detail at particular points in time, a fundamental aspect of sound change remains mysterious: how do patterns of fine phonetic variation over time contribute to sound change?

We need much more evidence from speech communities over time in order to understand how fine phonetic variation actually relates to processes of sound change. Most of our theoretical understanding of sound change does not come from 'real-time' studies which chart actual changes at different points in time, but from 'apparent time' studies which infer change by comparing patterns of variation in generations of speakers recorded at the same time point. The vernacular dialect of Glasgow over the past forty years presents an ideal resource for a real time study. Comparison of recent sociolinguistic studies with earlier descriptions suggests that alongside stability in many sounds (e.g. local vowel pronunciations), a number of changes are taking place, some continuing gradual changes (e.g. loss of 'r' in e.g. car), others appearing more abruptly (e.g. the use of a vowel for 'l' in e.g. tell). Glasgow's post-war urban regeneration led to social upheaval, which may also have created disturbances in linguistic patterning.



The recent social history together with a distinctive dialect vocabulary make Glaswegian particularly suitable for investigating the interrelationships between fine phonetic variation and different aspects of language use.

In this project we will extend the methods of the real-time study of speech by building an electronic corpus of Glasgow dialect using a high-speed searchable database, and developing and applying the latest phonetic and statistical methods to analyse it. We will provide the first real- and apparent-time study of fine-grained phonetic variation and change across speakers of different ages from four decades of an urban dialect of English, taking into account the contribution of factors such as

Images of Glasgow, clockwise from top left: tenements on Hillhead Street, Buchanan Street, Glasgow Science Centre, The Clyde Arc, locally known as the 'Squinty Bridge', Pacific Quay. All images © University of Glasgow.

word use, social factors, and the individual speaker. And we aim to develop a more informed theoretical understanding of the role of fine phonetic variation in sound change, especially with respect to how sound change is linked to speakers' mental representations of speech over time.

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Jane was awarded a Research Project Grant in June 2011; providing £235,682 over 36 months.