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## Book review: The Mersey Sound: Liverpool's Language, People and Places

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Anthony Grant and Clive Grey, eds. 2007. *The Mersey Sound: Liverpool's Language, People and Places*. Ormskirk: Open House Press. xvi + 248 pp. Price not listed (pb; ISBN 978-0-9544463-3-8).

### Reviewed by Warren Maguire

This volume is described as “the first major book on Liverpool’s English” (Back Cover), and brings together nine papers by academics mostly connected with Edge Hill University in Ormskirk, Lancashire. The collection of papers is said to “represent the state of current scientific research into Merseyside’s language” (Back Cover), and seeks to redress the lack of published linguistic research on the variety (p. 3, 5), a welcome aim, given the complex history and divergent nature of the variety (colloquially known as *Scouse*). However, the intended audience for the volume is not altogether obvious, and, despite the editors’ plea that “Merseyside’s regional language varieties should be the focus of a major series of linguistic study as a matter of urgency” (p. 5), is it not clear that this volume fulfils this brief.

The volume is described as being “aimed at local readers and scholars further afield” (Back Cover), and as:

a book for people who want to know more about local language. It is not a report on the application of cutting edge sociolinguistic or phonetic theory as applied to Scouse but a book designed to get readers, non-linguists as well as linguists, more aware of the features of Scouse that make it distinctive and the way in which it has changed and continues to do so. (p. v)

Broadening the appeal of linguistic research and making it accessible to the wider public is a worthy aim, but it is one fraught with difficulty: assuming too much knowledge may make it hard for non-linguists to follow the text; assuming too little knowledge risks over-simplifying the issues and making it of little interest to a more specialist audience. This difficulty is apparent throughout the volume, both between and within chapters (see the individual chapter reviews below).

Unfortunately this tricky issue is not the only problem with *The Mersey Sound*. Although a number of the chapters in the volume are excellent introductions to some of the more interesting issues surrounding Liverpool English (in particular those by Honeybone, Montgomery and Watson), several of the chapters are of a much lower standard, and not just because they are partly aimed at a non-linguistic audience. In addition, the text is littered with formatting problems, missing references, punctuation errors, accidental repetitions, and so on – some examples among many include unintended italics on pp. 30-1, a repeated phrase on p. 112 (ln. 30), a hanging figure caption on p. 168 (top), and references which aren’t in the bibliography on p. 222 (ln. 34), p. 238.

Following Grey and Grant’s introductory chapter, “Liverpool’s English: *Scouse*, or *Liverpudlian*, if you prefer...” are eight chapters which concentrate on particular aspects of Liverpool’s history or language, starting with Pamela B. Russell’s “Liverpool’s past: a magical history tour”. In order to understand the genesis and development of Liverpool English, we must first understand its history, in particular the history of its rapid population growth in the 18<sup>th</sup> and, particularly, the 19<sup>th</sup>

centuries. This crucial issue is briefly addressed in Honeybone's chapter (discussed below), but is largely missing from Russell's chapter. Although this chapter does cover the key events in the city's history (many of them irrelevant to the development of Liverpool English), it reads like something published by the Liverpool tourist board rather than as an objective history. There is no attempt at historical analysis, no analysis of population change, not a single mention of the relationship between the city's history and the development of Liverpool English, and almost nothing in the way of references. Instead we find clichés and subjective comments such as “the phoenix-like creativity of Liverpool's people” (p. 17) and “The Royalists had lost control of the North, partly as a result of underestimating the courage and tenacity of the townspeople of Liverpool” (p. 21). All of this means that this is not a serious account of history of Liverpool (never mind Liverpool English), and it is not really clear what purpose the chapter is meant to serve.

Russell's second chapter, “The place-names of ‘Greater Liverpool’” consists of a long and rather impenetrable list of place-names with suggested etymologies – although how these are determined, and how they are relevant to Liverpool English is left unsaid. The somewhat simplistic analysis which follows (pp. 69-70), and the tenuous conclusions drawn from the data (e.g. “the incoming Scandinavians came sporadically and, necessarily, peacefully”, p. 69), are rather unconvincing.

The next chapter, “Our friends in the North: relic dialects in the area between Southport and Preston”, by Clive Grey and Barbara Richardson, attempts to tackle the question of the dialect background to Liverpool English by examining traditional dialect features in the rural areas to the north of Liverpool. This is a crucial issue for understanding the development of the variety, but unfortunately this chapter is a model of how *not* to go about this exercise. After a rather discursive description of the geographical setting, the chapter proceeds to list a series of disparate linguistic features (mostly phonological and lexical) which have been recorded in these dialects. Although the sources of data examined include the *Survey of English Dialects* (Orton, Sanderson and Widdowson 1962-71), little is made of the copious amounts of data contained therein, with the analysis concentrating instead on an amateur dialect glossary by Sutton (1980) and the speech of a single relict dialect speaker from the village of Hesketh Bank. The results of this unsystematic analysis tell us little about the origins of Liverpool English, and the ‘data’ are left to speak for themselves rather than being used to explain the formation of the urban dialect.

The following chapter, “New-dialect formation in nineteenth century Liverpool: a brief history of Scouse”, by Patrick Honeybone, is a much more convincing attempt to get to grips with the origins of Liverpool English, albeit one which only scratches the surface of this complex and fascinating subject. The chapter is clearly aimed at a linguistic readership, but it should be readily accessible to undergraduates and others with a grounding in basic linguistics. Honeybone analyses the origins of four features (TH-stopping, non-rhoticity, identity of the NURSE and SQUARE vowels, and lenition of stops, particularly /t/) in Liverpool English in light of Trudgill's model of new-dialect formation (Trudgill 1986, 2004), and briefly analyses the population changes in Liverpool in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries which dramatically changed the social landscape of the city. The analysis of the features is careful and considered, although it is not clear that these features provide evidence for Trudgill's scenario in the formation of the variety. As Honeybone admits, Liverpool was not a *tabula rasa*

situation (as required by Trudgill's model), and, as such, the situation is potentially rather different than, for example, the formation of New Zealand English. Nevertheless, Honeybone's analysis is a promising starting point and will doubtless encourage further research in this direction.

In keeping with the rather eclectic nature of this volume, the next chapter, "Looking (literally) at Liverpool English: thoughts on the popular (and less popular) documentation of Scouse lexicon" by Anthony Grant, turns to an entirely different matter, in this case one more likely to appeal to a wider non-linguistic audience. Grant's entertaining chapter assesses previous attempts to compile a Scouse Dictionary, and makes some useful suggestions (pp. 156-7) as to what such a work ought (and ought not) to contain, although one suspects that the boundaries he draws may not always be as obvious in reality.

In Chris Montgomery's chapter, "Perceptions of Liverpool English", we return again to a more technical linguistic analysis, from the perspective of Perceptual Dialectology (Preston 1989, 1999). Montgomery analyses the ability of young residents of three locations in northern England, Carlisle, Crewe and Hull, to delimit regional varieties of British English on maps and to recognise and locate audio samples of regional varieties. He finds that Scouse is the most commonly and consistently identified variety in the draw-a-map task, and that it was one of the most accurately located audio samples. Interestingly, Montgomery finds evidence that the residents of Crewe may be identifying with or 'claiming' the Scouse accent (Williams, Garret and Coupland 1999), which suggests that Liverpool English might be enjoying some kind of prestige far beyond Merseyside. Montgomery's contribution certainly provides a fascinating insight into perceptions of Scouse, but it is perhaps the least accessible chapter for a non-specialist audience in this volume – for example, the visually impressive starburst charts could do with further explanation.

The next chapter, "Directions of change in contemporary Scouse: reflections on issues of origin and empirical evidence" by Clive Grey is, along with Grey and Richardson's joint contribution, the weakest chapter in the volume. The chapter covers a considerable amount of ground, from the origins of Liverpool English, through defining what it is we mean by Scouse, to examining current variation and change in the variety. Unfortunately the account is rather superficial and uninformed – the historical analysis is not based on any principles, the meaning of the problematic term 'slang' is not elucidated, which is crucial in a work aimed at a non-specialist audience, and the analysis of current variation in Liverpool English is methodologically unsound. This analysis consists of nothing more than noting whether particular features occur in the informants' speech, and no variable analysis is conducted or even referred to. The informants seem to be Liverpoolians who have appeared in television programmes (p. 206), but this is not altogether clear, and it is not obvious how informants have been sampled for analysis. This chapter could have been an opportunity to engage non-linguist readers with the methods and results of sociolinguistic analysis, but instead it is a confusing mish-mash of suggestions and casual observations which tells us very little about linguistic variation and change in present-day Liverpool English.

Thankfully the final chapter of *The Mersey Sound*, "Is Scouse getting Scouser? Exploring phonological change in contemporary Liverpool English" by Kevin

Watson, is a great example of how much we can learn when a proper analysis is conducted. Watson compares two corpora of Liverpool English, one of younger speakers collected in 2002 and another of older speakers collected in the 1990s. These data are used to demonstrate that although there are differences between the younger and older speakers, the only local feature of the five examined which has decreased is the use of the GOOSE vowel in words such as *book* and *cook*. The others (TH-stopping, START fronting, /r/-tapping, and stop lenition) have either been maintained or have increased, suggesting that Liverpool English is not converging with other northern varieties of English. Although some might not agree with Watson's characterisation of 'dialect levelling' (e.g. Britain 2009), and although this chapter is not really pitched at a non-specialist audience, this is an excellent contribution which makes a valuable addition to our knowledge of on-going change in varieties of British English.

Thus *The Mersey Sound* is very much a book of two halves, with the excellent chapters by Honeybone, Montgomery and Watson overshadowed by the dissatisfactory contributions by Grey, Richardson and Russell. This is a great shame, since Liverpool English is an extremely fruitful topic of research. With its catchy title, *The Mersey Sound* will no doubt appeal to interested non-linguists and undergraduate students, but readers need to be aware that not all of the content can be described as "current scientific research into Merseyside's language", and unfortunately some of the chapters fall well short of the mark, regardless of the audience they are intended for. However, the chapters on *New-dialect formation*, *Perceptions* and *Is Scouse getting Scouser?* are highly recommended to linguists, students and anyone else interested in the fascinating research which is being done on Liverpool English.

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