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CHAPTER 7

# “I’m dead posh in school”

## Attitudes and linguistic behaviour of Merseyside adolescents

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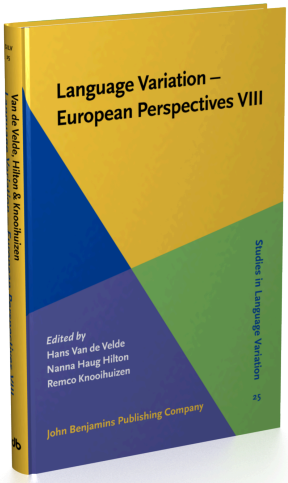


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# "I'm dead posh in school"

## Attitudes and linguistic behaviour of Merseyside adolescents

Rachel Byrne
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Liverpool English, or "Scouse", is a dialect often used by speakers in Merseyside. This study involves the use of word-list elicitation and semi-structured group interviews with adolescents from two schools in Merseyside: one in Liverpool, and one on the Wirral. Analysis of the elicited vowels of the SQUARE and NURSE lexical sets shows that Wirral speakers orient themselves to Liverpool pronunciations to an extent, using NURSE fronting in unexpected ways to achieve varying linguistic and social goals. The qualitative data shows that Merseyside speakers are highly aware of the social markedness of Scouse, with Wirral speakers using Liverpool forms to identify themselves as local Merseyside speakers, but not "Scousers". Participants from both schools intentionally engage in style-shifting of local dialect in order to construct unique identities for themselves.[1]

**Keywords**: dialect, accent, identity, style-shifting, sociolinguistics, variation, change, indexicality, enregisterment

### 1. Introduction

Liverpool English, commonly known as "Scouse", is the dialect used by many speakers in Liverpool and the wider Merseyside area of North-West England. The Liverpool accent "is limited to the city itself, to urban areas adjoining it, and to towns facing it across the River Mersey" (Hughes et al. 2012: 112). Scouse has a highly distinctive phonology, as well as a large localised vocabulary (Crowley 2017). Phonologically, the most recognisable features of Scouse include "TH-stopping, non-rhoticity, the absence of contrast in the SQUARE and NURSE lexical sets and

1. Parts of this paper formed part of my MRes thesis; see Byrne (2018) for a full account of this study.

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Liverpool lenition" (Honeybone 2007: 107). In particular, these merged SQUARE and NURSE lexical sets are typically fronted in Liverpool English (Watson and Clark 2013). The degree of fronting of these lexical sets by Merseyside speakers is the focus of the current study. I also consider the interaction of Scouse phonology with speaker identity and attitudes towards Liverpool dialect. As an urban variety of English, Scouse is often associated with working-class speech (Grant and Grey 2007), and in perceptual dialectology studies it has frequently been assessed negatively in categories such as "social attractiveness" and "prestige" (Coupland and Bishop 2007; Montgomery 2012). By looking at Scouse in this way, I address the question of how attitudes towards Scouse impact upon the way speakers present themselves within their own localities in Merseyside. The data has been collected from two different geographical regions in Merseyside, following Newbrook (1999), who asserts that the Scouse dialect area is expanding into Liverpool's hinterlands. Data was collected from one school within the Liverpool area, and a grammar school on the Wirral; this is a region of Merseyside that is less than ten miles away from the Liverpool school, but separated geographically by the River Mersey that runs between them. The participants in the study are from predominantly middle-class areas of Liverpool and Merseyside.

Collecting data from these different areas allows us to consider the relationship between attitudes and linguistic behaviour of speakers from regions which, despite being relatively geographically close, are impacted by differing social, geographical and cultural factors.

## 2. Merseyside English

Linguistically, Liverpool is a highly recognisable and unique area (Montgomery 2012). Although Liverpool shares elements of its dialect with other regions, for example the lack of a split between FOOT and STRUT vowels which is consistent with other Northern areas, it also has unique features including "Liverpool lenition", where /t, d, k/ can be fricativised, and the SQUARE~NURSE merger (Honeybone 2007: 107). Notably, the merged SQUARE and NURSE lexical sets are pronounced as a mid front vowel [ɛː] in Liverpool English, rather than the mid central vowel realisation of NURSE [ɜː] and diphthong approximating pronunciation of SQUARE [ɛə] used in Standard British English (Watson and Clark 2013: 298). In other varieties of Northern British English, the "SQUARE vowel can also be realised as a mid front monophthong" (ibid.). Watson and Clark (2013) also observed that fronted realisations of NURSE were found to be particularly salient, where Merseyside speakers perceived [ɛː] to be marked. In particular, they found that their participants did

not respond to hearing central NURSE pronunciations, while they often reacted to fronted NURSE pronunciations (ibid).

Liverpool English is also distinct in that it has often proven to be resistant to dialect levelling. Beal (2010) observed that Merseyside adolescents engage in unique linguistic behaviours, including resisting dialect levelling with regard to T-glottalling. She says that "young Liverpudlians are behaving differently from their contemporaries in other towns and cities because they have such a strong sense of local identity", and there is "no incentive" for them to adopt it when 't>h' carries sociolinguistic meaning as glottalisation in Liverpool (2010: 85). The current research therefore considers the extent of the impact that such perceptions of identity has upon young speakers' realisations of SQUARE and NURSE.

As well as resisting linguistic change from other regions, Scouse linguistic features have been shown to be diffusing outside of Liverpool. Newbrook (1999: 91) noted that a process of dialect levelling has led to a direction of linguistic change on the Wirral that is moving towards "Liverpool/Birkenhead" usage, rather than diverging away from it. This has relevant social implications due to the fact that the Wirral is both "middle-class in character", displaying "larger proportions of higher-prestige usage" than in Liverpool, whilst simultaneously containing "large numbers of working class speakers with strong local accents of various kinds" (1999: 91). Newbrook's stance that Liverpool and Birkenhead (one of the Wirral towns closest to Liverpool) are linguistically similar reinforces the idea that speech production in Liverpool and on the Wirral is often comparable. Yet it is important to note that Birkenhead, like Liverpool, is demographically more working-class than other areas of Wirral. The current study focuses on more middle-class areas in both regions, where the relationship between Liverpool and Wirral perceptions and linguistic behaviour is less widely documented.

Given that Liverpool English is often negatively assessed in perceptual dialectology studies due to its working-class connotations (Montgomery 2012; Grant and Grey 2007), the idea that some Wirral speakers are converging their speech towards Liverpool English, rather than away from it, is arguably unexpected. However, Newbrook argues that "future developments are likely to involve the continuation" of linguistic assimilation towards Liverpool English on the Wirral (1999: 105).

The distinct linguistic behaviour of Liverpool and Merseyside speakers is evidently influenced by speaker attitudes, which has been demonstrated by previous research in the wider Merseyside area. West (2015) found that the extent of linguistic convergence towards Liverpool English in regions on the Merseyside/Lancashire border is often linked to speaker perceptions of Scouse. She noted that in Southport, where speakers held more negative perceptions of Scouse, speakers maintained a distance from Scouse features in their language usage; meanwhile, speakers from

Ormskirk,[2] who held more positive attitudes towards Scouse, were converging towards Liverpool features. Her findings were particularly relevant with regard to the SQUARE and NURSE lexical sets, where "younger Ormskirk speakers' positive assessments of Liverpool and Scouse are correlated with their raised production of NURSE" (2015: 337). Furthermore, West noted that it was younger females who were leading the change towards "a more fronted, Scouse-like pronunciation of NURSE, with a minimum of 60% (6 out of 10) of NURSE free speech forms fronting and raising towards SQUARE" (2015: 338).

### 2.1 Indexicality and enregisterment

When considering the relationship between linguistic behaviour and speaker attitudes, I will be applying the concepts of indexicality and enregisterment. Indexicality involves the linking of micro-social and macro-social linguistic concepts, as outlined by Silverstein (2003). There are three orders of indexicality: the first order involves correlating a "particular linguistic form and social category", observable by outsiders rather than the speaker themselves (Beal and Cooper 2015: 27). Second-order indexicality involves speakers noticing the links between linguistic features and social categories, whilst third-order indexicality involves forms linked with particular categories becoming "the subject of overt comment" (Beal and Cooper 2015: 27). Related to this is the concept of enregisterment, which Agha (2007: 81) defines as "processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population". When language becomes enregistered, "a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognised register", where the social status of a speaker is "linked to a specific scheme of cultural values" (Agha 2003: 231). In an analysis of Pittsburghese, Johnstone (2013) described how enregisterment according to multiple schemas can evoke a Pittsburghese identity. For example, "a feature that evokes (and helps construct) a Pittsburgh persona may also evoke (and help construct) a working-class persona, or it may evoke both, thus serving to overlay and align Pittsburgh and working-class identities" (2013: 225). When speakers were aware of the social salience of particular features, Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson (2006) found that speakers drew upon particular features of Pittsburghese in different speech contexts; for example, the monophthongization of the diphthong /aw/ is more likely to occur in the speech of working-class Pittsburgh males than

2. Southport is located on the Merseyside side of the border, 19 miles from Liverpool, whilst Ormskirk is in Lancashire, 14 miles north of Liverpool.

other people. Due to these social factors being indexically linked with use of this linguistic feature, Johnstone et al. concluded that speakers who use /aw/ "may use it less when they are trying harder to sound educated or cosmopolitan, or more when they are trying harder to sound like working-class men or like other Pittsburghers" (2006: 83). The notion that speakers engage in style-shifting due to social factors being indexically linked to the use of linguistic variables is also applicable to the current situation in Merseyside with Scouse.

## 3. Methodology

The participants in this study are adolescents, since the attitudes of speakers in this age category have a particularly significant impact upon their linguistic production. Also, adolescents are often considered to be the primary facilitators of linguistic change (Watson 2007). Data was elicited from 27 students across two schools. One school is an all-girls grammar school based on the Wirral; the other is a co-educational school in Liverpool. Following previous research into linguistic behaviour and identity construction (Llamas 2007; Burbano-Elizando 2010; West 2015), data was collected via a mixed-method approach. First, participants read from a list of 25 words on a one-on-one basis, so that specific phonological tokens could be collected from a careful speech context. This was carried out in the school classrooms with only the researcher, individual student, and class teacher present for ethical reasons. Whilst it must be acknowledged this has might have had the potential to influence elicitation due to the Observers' Paradox (Labov 1972), the teacher was not an active participant and was engaged in their own work whilst the word list elicitation activity took place. The results of this paper focus on the two words from this list, *fair* and *first*, which represented the SQUARE and NURSE lexical sets. Next, I conducted semi-structured group interviews to obtain attitudinal data. I held two interviews in the Wirral school, with one group consisting of seven participants, three of whom were aged between 16 and 17 years old, and four of whom were aged between 13 and 14 years old. The second interview group consisted of six participants: four aged between 15 and 16, one aged between 12 and 13, and one aged between 16 and 17 years old. All of the students in the Wirral school are female. In the Liverpool school, I interviewed all fourteen participants together. All of the participants were from the same English class and aged between 16 and 17 years old. Eight of these students were female, and six were male. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was audio-recorded using a Zoom H4n recorder. The tokens discussed in the quantitative results were manually extracted using Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2017), and measurements for F1 and

F2 were taken for SQUARE and NURSE words. There were 54 tokens analysed, one for the elicitation of SQUARE and one for NURSE by each individual. The data was normalised using the NORM Vowel Normalization and Plotting Suite (Kendall and Thomas 2007), following the method described in Labov et al. (2006: 39–40).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Quantitative data

The quantitative results primarily focus on the extent of fronting used in the SQUARE and NURSE lexical sets. Previous research has shown that fronting, of NURSE in particular, is salient both linguistically and perceptually (Watson and Clark 2013; West 2015). For this reason, and due to the fact that vowel raising was not found to be statistically significant in the results, I focus only on fronting in this analysis.

Figure 1 shows that, there is a high degree of overlap in F2 values in the Liverpool school, supporting results from Watson and Clark (2013).

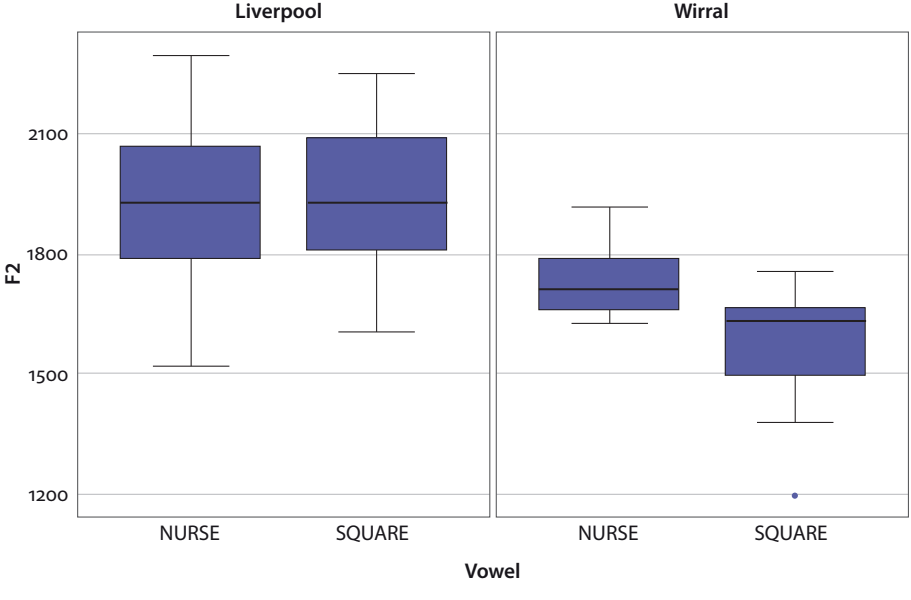


**Figure 1.** Boxplot of F2 values of SQUARE and NURSE, split up by school

For the Wirral speakers, realisations of the vowels in SQUARE and NURSE are not completely distinct. The overall lack of overlap seen in the Wirral results is particularly evident in comparison to the Liverpool data where the merger is clearly shown. The data shows that these Wirral speakers are not following anticipated trends in the way that they use NURSE fronting, as speakers are fronting NURSE, the more backed vowel of the lexical set, more than SQUARE in the word-list exercise.

Using t-tests in R, I analysed the F2 data (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Paired t-test of F2 SQUARE~NURSE results for both schools

| Test | t | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|
| Wirral school | −3.010 | 20.189 | 0.007 |
| Liverpool school | −0.064 | 25.560 | 0.950 |

We can observe from the t-tests that the difference between SQUARE and NURSE in the Wirral school has a statistically significant p-value, whilst the distinction is not significant for the Liverpool speakers. The statistical significance of the Wirral fronting results is emphasised by the commentary the participants make during the interviews which will be discussed in 4.2, which indicates that they are overtly aware of salient features of Scouse, including SQUARE and NURSE fronting. This indicates that the use of NURSE fronting by Wirral speakers is above their level of conscious awareness, and as such, has the potential to "become available for social work" including style-shifting (Johnstone et al. 2006: 82).

These findings are particularly unexpected when we consider the context of this data, which was collected in an educational setting in a middle-class area. Juskan established in his data that "middle-class speakers have lower F2 values than their working class counterparts", which was "not surprising because it means that middle-class speakers use less Scouse variants than working-class Liverpudlians, which is true for both female… and male subjects" (2018: 123). However, the Wirral speakers' fronting of NURSE shows that they are engaging with Liverpool English, despite maintaining some distinction between themselves and Liverpool speakers by not fully merging the SQUARE and NURSE lexical sets. Whilst the data shows that Wirral speakers are diverging from the trends to some extent, they also support results such as those of West (2015: 338), where younger Ormskirk speakers, who viewed Liverpool and Scouse positively, were leading changes towards "a more fronted, Scouse-like pronunciation of NURSE", particularly in free speech forms. It should be noted, however, that the results of this study are from word list data rather than free speech forms, where participants were in a careful, not spontaneous, speech context. It appears that a major social shift has taken place amongst

adolescents in this area in recent years, where middle-class adolescents in a grammar school setting are now engaging in a highly socially marked practice that is strongly associated with Scouse (Watson and Clark 2013), even in careful speech.

I also tested for gender significance in the results, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Paired t-test for gender significance of F2 values, first comparing males to females from both the Liverpool and the Wirral school, then males and females from the Liverpool school only

| Test | t | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|
| Both schools | −0.291 | 31.188 | 0.773 |
| Liverpool school | −4.398 | 25.280 | <0.001 |

The results of the t-test in Table 2 indicate that gender is not significant when we compare the male speakers with female speakers from both schools. Because the Wirral school is an only-girls school, it was not possible to test for gender significance here. Gender also proved not to be significant when comparing the results of females from both schools. When the test was conducted for speakers in the Liverpool school only, gender does prove to be statistically significant. This gender variation is not necessarily unexpected, and has been found in other studies of adolescents including that of Eckert (1989: 245), who found that "gender has a variety of effects on variables".

Although gender is quantitatively significant, unlike the results for SQUARE and NURSE fronting in Table 1, the speakers do not explicitly mention gender during the interviews. Swann (2002: 52) addresses such instances where gender is not made relevant by participants, summarising an argument by Schegloff (1997) that "any aspects of context that are seen to be relevant to an interaction (including the social characteristics of participants/speakers) should derive from the orientations of the participants/speakers themselves, and not from those of the analyst". I am analysing my data from a "third wave" perspective, where variation is viewed "as a reflection of social identities and categories to the linguistic practice in which speakers place themselves in the social landscape through stylistic practice" (Eckert 2012: 94). As such, I will now turn to a discussion of those social variables that speakers deem to be salient during the interviews, and how these relate to their linguistic behaviour.

### 4.2 Perceptions of Scouse: Linguistic features

To understand why the students use SQUARE and NURSE in the ways that they do, we must consider the social and perceptual functions that Scouse serves for them. In both schools, participants were overtly aware that NURSE was often more fronted by Liverpool English speakers. When asked which linguistic features they would

describe as "Scouse", students in the Wirral school commented that the discourse marker *erm* [ɜːm] would be pronounced more like [ɛːm] in Scouse. Similarly, Liverpool students used the example of the word *Mersey* being pronounced more like [mɛːzi] than [mɜːzi] by Liverpool English speakers, and that they recognised this as sounding "Scouse". The perception of this feature being linked to Scouse by students from both schools indicates that for these adolescents, fronted NURSE forms are socially marked and index a Scouse identity. An analysis of SQUARE and NURSE realisations by Newbrook showed "surprisingly low salience" by Wirral speakers, with "little reference… made to them in discussion" (1999: 95). The reason given for this was that "the rather strong middle-class tendency to preserve the RP contrast makes this issue less salient than elsewhere in Merseyside" (1999: 95). The results from the current study indicate that a major change has occurred in the Wirral both linguistically and socially since these conclusions were drawn, as NURSE fronting is indeed a salient phonological feature according to speakers from both the Wirral and Liverpool. Wirral students in middle class areas are no longer relating their pronunciations to RP as in Newbrook's analysis, but moving more towards Liverpool forms. As well as NURSE fronting, extracts 1 to 3 demonstrate other features that Wirral participants felt to be indicative of a Scouse dialect:

(1) it's not posh but it's like we pronounce our *t*s more than like Scousers do and like enunciate some of the words more

(2) The *r*s of Scouse people are sometimes a bit like I don't know how. I can't like do it but I don't know. do you know what I mean like imagine someone saying Steven Gerrard you can imagine the Gerrard bit like the double *r*

(3) There's a lot of slang as well like if you watch like Eastenders or any of them and they're like they use slang that's quite similar to like Scouse

In Extract 1 speakers comment on t-lenition, with the reference to pronouncing [t] "more than like Scousers do", and in Extract 2 we see a description of a trilled [r], which was recorded by Cheshire and Edwards (1991: 229) as a feature of Liverpool English. Indeed, Cheshire and Edwards (ibid.) discuss a comment from an interview informant who describes "Scouse" pronunciation of [r] in a very similar manner to that shown in Extract 2. Their informant states "when I start to speak like a Scouser. I say *married* as if there's about 7 *r*s in it – *marrrrrrried*", which is analogous to the description of "double the r" mentioned above, suggesting that the same pronunciation is being described. In Extract 3 we see a perception of informality or slang being described as part of what they believe constitutes Scouse language, reflecting salient features highlighted in previous research into Liverpool English (e.g. Honeybone 2007). When the Wirral speakers were asked how they would describe their own accent, responses included:

(4) A Wirral accent

(5) I wouldn't say it's Scouse

(6) I don't feel like it's really an accent. It's just like there

(7) It's good it's just normal

(8) It's not that strong I don't think it's that strong compared to Liverpool

Although one student described their way of speaking as "a Wirral accent", the students in comments 6 and 7 argued that they did not have a distinct accent at all, whilst extracts 5 and 8 suggest that the main notable feature of a Wirral accent is that it is *not* a Scouse, or Liverpool, variety. The perceptions of Wirral speakers emulate Jansen's (2013: 209) observations of Carlisle English speakers:

> Carlisle English (henceforth CE) speakers are almost always identified as Scottish English or Newcastle English speakers. At the same time, they insist that their dialect is different from Newcastle English, let alone Scottish English. Yet when asked about their dialect the majority of CE speakers cannot name any phonological or morphosyntactic features.

Similarly, on the Wirral, speakers believe that their way of speaking is different to Liverpool English, yet Wirral features are not deemed salient enough for there to be a definable "Wirral" dialect with distinct linguistic forms.

### 4.3 Perceptions of Scouse identity

For many of the informants in this study, both in Liverpool and Wirral, a Scouse identity is perceived to be fixed and inflexible, with certain categories that must be fulfilled in order for somebody to authentically identify as a "Scouser". In fact, students from both schools commented that using Scouse linguistic features is not enough to evoke a Scouse identity. One Liverpool student argued that Scouse identity depends on multiple variables:

(9) How strong your accent is, the colour of your bin, whereabouts you're from

For context, in Liverpool, residents use purple bins for refuse waste, which is a different colour from the bins used at homes outside of the area (such as Wirral). As such this is considered by some as a marker of being a Liverpudlian, and therefore a "Scouser". Another student from the Liverpool school argued that somebody could only be defined as a Scouser if they were born in Liverpool. When another student responded to this, asking whether they would be considered to be a "Scouser", despite not being born in Liverpool but having lived there since the age of two

years old, the student responded that "I wouldn't personally class you as a Scouser because you weren't born here". The responses illustrate that for Liverpool speakers, "Scouseness" depends on much more than linguistic behaviour. These adolescents show that they view "Scouse" identity as static, requiring the fulfilment of particular social requirements that cannot be controlled by the individual, for example their place of birth. For Wirral speakers, there was a distinct awareness of such views, meaning that they had clear ideas as to what a Scouse identity might be, but it was not one that they related to themselves. In particular, the students in extracts 10, 11 and 12 emphasise that they are often assigned a "Scouse" identity by non-local speakers, but this was not an identity that they chose to orient to:

(10) I feel like we don't really notice it. But when you go away people are like oh my God you're so Scouse and it's like no

(11) I feel like older generations though like if someone said you sound Scouse from like down South or whatever or where someone else is from like yeah you would think they would be more like protective over the Wirral accent and they're like no we're on the other side of the water sort of thing like they don't really wanna be compared to a Scouse accent

(12) I think it's odd because I don't think we do sound Scouse it's like completely like yeah it's like saying we sound like Australian or something 'cause we really don't

We can observe from the responses of the Wirral participants that although they are aware that their linguistic behaviour can lead to them being identified as Merseyside speakers, they explicitly deny any association with being a "Scouser", to the point that the participant in comment 12 feels that their dialect being described as "Scouse" is as applicable to them as being described as "Australian". This is not to say that the Wirral speakers are distancing themselves due to having negative perceptions of Liverpool, as comment 13 shows:

(13) I don't know I feel like it depends who it comes from if it comes from someone who doesn't live round here and they're like ooh are you from Liverpool it doesn't make you like proud but it's like ooh yeah that's where I'm from I'm from near there

This student highlights the positive associations that several Wirral speakers held towards having a *local* identity, and being recognisable as a Merseyside speaker, though not a Liverpudlian. For Wirral adolescents there seems to be a sense of pride at being identified as belonging to the Merseyside geographic region. However, they are anxious for this local identity not to be confused with a specifically "Scouse"

identity. This is partly due to their awareness of social stereotypes enregistered by the use of Scouse features, as illustrated in comments 14 and 15. Although this is not the only contributing factor: it is also in large part due to an awareness of the connotations of inauthenticity that are related to non-Liverpudlians identifying as Scouse, which I discuss in Section 4.4.

(14) There's like the stereotypical views of like uneducated and stuff around the accent

(15) People can think it's quite chavvy

These students demonstrate that even on the Wirral, where speakers have a connection with and understanding of Liverpool, they are exceedingly aware of the negative stereotypes associated with Scouse. The students suggest that they do not necessarily believe these stereotypes themselves (or at least they are reluctant to admit it if these are personal views), stating "people can think…" or "there's like the stereotypical views of…". These comments reinforce the Wirral speakers' awareness of such negative associations of Scouse that have been highlighted in other works (Coupland and Bishop 2007; Grant and Grey 2007) where Scouse is linked to being working class, or in this case, linked to ideas of being "uneducated" or "chavvy". (The adjective *chavvy* originates from the slang term *chav*, which is defined as "a young person of a type characterized by brash and loutish behaviour and the wearing of designer-style clothes (esp. sportswear); usually with connotations of low social status" (OED 2020)). The Wirral students' understanding of the use of Scouse indexing such stereotypes is arguably an important contributor as to why they distance themselves from being related to the identity of a Scouser, despite acknowledging that are linguistically similar.

## 4.4 (In)authenticity and covert prestige

Another significant reason why Wirral speakers behave in this way is due to connotations of inauthenticity associated with non-Liverpudlians using Scouse features:

(16) I feel like people say it's plazzy Scouse

(17) Even though we're not trying to be Scouse people make out like you're trying to be someone that you're not and trying to (.) speak (.) you know like you're copying someone

*Plazzy* is defined in *The Liverpool English Dictionary* as "plastic; false, imitation, second-rate" (Crowley 2017: 181). These comments reinforce why the Wirral speakers were so reluctant to socially identify as Scousers. Issues of inauthenticity are

echoed by the Liverpool students, who suggested that if a speaker from outside of Liverpool used Scouse dialect, this would mean that the person would be defined as a "wool", a similar term to "plastic Scouser". *Wool* is defined by Crowley as "someone who lives outside Liverpool i.e. St. Helens, Skelmersdale, Prescot,[3] the Wirral, etc. and therefore not strictly a true Scouser" (2017: 247). In Liverpool, one student described a "wool" as:

(18) Someone who tries to be Scouse but like the Wirral I don't think you [the researcher] sound very Scouse so I wouldn't really class you as a wool. But someone from Runcorn or Skelmersdale comes over sounding really Scouse like no. You're not

This response echoes those of the Wirral students, in that it is partly the intention of the speaker that determines whether they will be considered to be a false Scouser or not; that is, if somebody "tries to be" Scouse, this will be viewed more negatively than a speaker just sounding Scouse in their language. I believe that this is due to the perceived difference between sharing linguistic forms compared to a speaker trying to replicate a "Scouse" identity, and therefore social practices associated with Scouse. As the data shows, the conditions that a speaker must adhere to in order to be considered to be a "Scouser" are, according to these Liverpool adolescents, very strict; as such, somebody trying to replicate a Liverpool identity without fitting into these categories can lead to them quickly being defined as inauthentic. Although the Merseyside students have shown awareness of the negative social stereotypes indexed by Scouse, it seems that there is simultaneously an in-group status that Liverpool speakers achieve by both using Scouse language and fulfilling the relevant social categories. Identifying as a Scouser is covertly prestigious for these Liverpool speakers, and "outsiders" who attempt to imitate a Scouse identity through either using "very Scouse" language or "trying to be" Scouse are derided. These findings reflect the results of Cooper (2019: 76), where some informants perceived the use of local (Sheffield) dialect features as symbolising an authentic local identity, whilst speakers from nearby Barnsley were identified as "outsiders". Moreover, "the main defining factor between these two identities is the perception that Sheffield and Barnsley have different accents to each other, which in turn indexes that Barnsley is distinct from Sheffield" (ibid). Something comparable is happening in Merseyside, with Wirral speakers engaging in a similar level of NURSE fronting to Liverpudlians,

3. St. Helens is 14.8 miles from Liverpool City Centre, Skelmersdale is approximately 16 miles away, and Prescot is just under 9 miles away. The average annual household income in these areas is £ 21,800, £ 20,700, and £ 19,900 respectively. Liverpool Pier Head average household income is £ 22,900. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2020).

whilst students from both areas perceive themselves to use "Scouse" very differently from each other. The Liverpool informants perceive the use of Scouse to symbolise authenticity and group solidarity, viewing the utilisation of these features by "outsiders" negatively.

### 4.5 Style-shifting and perceptions of class

In the Wirral school, perceptions of when using Scouse dialect was appropriate varied, primarily depending on the relationships that the students held with their interlocutors:

(19) I'm dead posh in school but like at home with my Mum 'cause my Mum's from Liverpool I go quite Scouse

(20) My family are. Well they're not Scouse they're not posh they're like normal. They like try and be posh [laughs] so they sound like dead posh to me compared to like some people in school so it's like a different environment I think like my voice goes lower and more scouse I think in school whereas at home I think it's like a bit different

(21) I feel like though if I said some things to my parents that I said to my friends they wouldn't like actually know what that word means they'd be like what does that mean… I just talk different to my friends when I talk. With the same accent but I think I change the words sometimes… for example you wouldn't say to your parents he was bevvied… but you'd say he was drunk. But you'd say to your friends probably he was bevvied

For Wirral adolescents, their use of style-shifting does not only depend upon their own perceptions of Scouse, but the way that they believe they might be perceived by others by using it. For example, the student in comment 20 considers their family to be "posh", and reports speaking "more Scouse" in school rather than at home. Meanwhile the student in comment 19, whose parents are or were local to Liverpool, felt more comfortable using Scouse at home than in school. The results support Johnstone's investigation of Pittsburghese (2013), where in the current study, Scouse is enregistered to mean a "not posh", or working-class identity. In some cases, such as comment 21, the students evoke the informal, not "posh" connotations enregistered by Scouse in order to build up covert prestige amongst friends. For them, Scouse is a repertoire that they draw upon to build relationships with others. The working-class identities indexed by the use of Scouse are emphasised by the Liverpool students:

(22) With a lot of regional accents like it tends to be like potentially like more working class erm. I don't mean just for Scouse I mean like with a lot of regional accents sort of like it tends to be thicker like and I think I think like Childwall and like you know it's not necessarily it's quite like a it's not posh but it's like a very middle class area so I think it's like probably less strong here I would say maybe like Kensington or Toxteth

(23) Childwall especially doesn't have a strong Scouse accent

It appears that the Liverpool students are positive about Scouse because they perceive *their* form of Scouse to be more middle-class, and therefore more prestigious. In particular, they differentiate themselves from less affluent areas such as Kensington or Toxteth, where a "stronger" Scouse accent indexes a working-class status. To some extent, the Liverpool students show a similar understanding of Scouse dialect as the Wirral speakers; that is, that stronger Scouse accents mean "more working class" and "not posh" respectively. The difference is that the Liverpool speakers are confident in their identity as Scousers, even more so because they perceive themselves to be "middle class" Liverpudlians who are "less Scouse" than those in other areas of Liverpool. The Wirral adolescents are also aware of their middle-class status, and therefore report to only draw upon Scouse in situations where they feel it is covertly prestigious, or they are trying to be informal. However, we know from the quantitative data that the Wirral speakers are engaging with Scouse even in careful speech contexts, although not to the same degree as the Liverpool students. This suggests that to some extent, Liverpool English is diffusing to middle class areas of the Wirral, supporting Beal (2010) and Newbrook (1999). Despite this, and even though the Liverpool students are proud of their Scouse identity, they are simultaneously conscious of the negative social qualities indexed by it:

(24) I went for my job interview when like I just before I started work obviously and I honestly like made my accent a lot less Scouse when I went for it but now that I'm more comfortable… I'll speak a lot more Scouse when I'm in work. Like I'll just speak the way I normally would but I did like tone it down a lot when I first started but I work in Birkenhead so it's not in Liverpool so that might be a reason for it

Like the Wirral students, the Liverpool speakers also style-shift Scouse, avoiding drawing upon a Scouse repertoire in more formal situations where they wish to present themselves positively. The motivations for style-shifting of Scouse shown here by Liverpool and Wirral students emphasise Coupland's assertion that dialect varieties are "particularly well configured for stylized performance because they do generally constitute known repertoires with known socio-cultural and personal associations – such as high/low socio-economic status" (2001: 350).

### 4.6 Impact of attitudes upon SQUARE and NURSE production

The Wirral students were highly cognisant of defining themselves in relation to Liverpool and Scouse, with a Wirral dialect or identity being secondary to this. Meanwhile, the Liverpool students were assured of their Scouse identities, and their only comments in relation to Wirral speakers (and people from other peripheral Merseyside regions) were that they viewed them as inauthentic outsiders. Such negotiations of identity are not surprising, with Wirral speakers being on the periphery of Liverpool geographically, linguistically and socially. In an investigation of tag question usage by girls at Midlan High School, Moore (2010: 132) noted that one of her participant's "marginal participation in the Townie CofP [community of practice] made her more aware of identity issues than her Popular peers, whose distance from the new CofP made it impinge less dramatically upon their sense of self". Whilst the current research is talking more widely, with the students in different regions of Merseyside rather than the same school, the Wirral adolescents do appear to be drawing upon similar ideologies. That is, as Wirral speakers interact with Liverpool due to living so close by, they are hyper-aware of their identity being directly in relation to Liverpool, rather than relating to a salient "Wirral" identity. The quantitative data shows that Wirral speakers are phonologically orienting themselves towards Liverpool English through NURSE fronting, which is a socially salient feature that indexes being "Scouse". This is particularly significant in relation to Juskan (2018), whose middle-class informants had lower F2 values than their working class counterparts. Here, middle class Wirral adolescents produce F2 NURSE on a level comparable with Liverpool speakers, highlighting a linguistic and social shift towards aspects of Scouse. These findings support Newbrook's assertion (1999) that assimilation towards Liverpool English would continue on the Wirral. Additionally, the female adolescents engaging with NURSE fronting here reflect West's Merseyside data (2015), where younger females are leading the convergence towards Liverpool English. However, unlike the Liverpool speakers, the Wirral students maintain a distinction between SQUARE and NURSE, and do not go so far as to fully merge them. This indicates that Wirral adolescents are specifically using NURSE fronting as a part of a covertly prestigious repertoire, primarily when amongst school friends or in situations that they perceive to be informal. Meanwhile, the Liverpool informants are comfortable in their Scouse identity, which is reflected in the way in which they engage with both fronting and merging of the SQUARE~NURSE lexical sets. For them Scouse brings about a sense of pride due to indexing in-group status. Even so, students from both schools showed that they were grappling with social issues related to Scouse, style-shifting away from it in contexts where they feel they might be judged negatively for using it.

## 5. Conclusions

This data shows that NURSE fronting remains salient both linguistically and perceptually in the minds of both Liverpool and Wirral speakers. In particular, Wirral students' use of NURSE fronting is above their level of consciousness, which is especially highlighted when taking the careful speech context into account. The results demonstrate the complexities of the relationship between linguistic behaviour and the identities that the speakers present. Although Wirral speakers are aware of salient Scouse features, and use NURSE fronting in particular contexts, they are simultaneously mindful of their out-group status with regard to a Scouse identity. For them, Scouse is used as a linguistic resource that is drawn upon to symbolise covert prestige and informality, rather than to define themselves as "Scousers".

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