Is Mockney creeping north?
Investigating the impact of TV on language change

Jane Stuart-Smith

Department of English Language, University of Glasgow
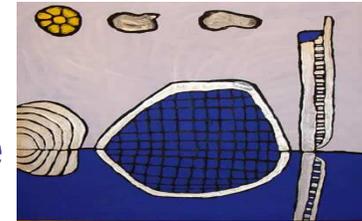

7 March 2007

Department of Media & Communication, University of Leicester

Is Mockney creeping north?
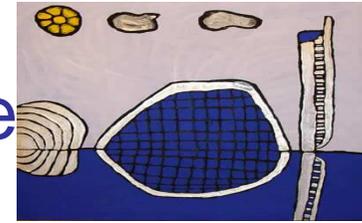# Investigating the impact of TV on language change

Paper overview

This paper presents similar material to that presented at Munich in December 06, but to a mass communications/media studies audience.
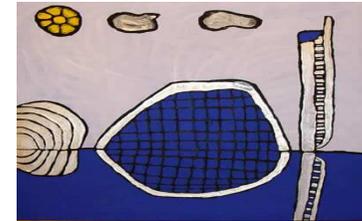
JSS 22/12/07

Is Mockney creeping north? Investigating the impact of TV on language change

- Language change in the UK
- TV and language change
- Why consider TV?
- The Glasgow media project
- Results
- Modelling the results
  - awareness and/or imitation?
- Concluding remarks

Language change in the UK

Certain features of pronunciation, such as the use of [f] for (th), TH-fronting, in e.g. *think, tooth,* are spreading across the UK

e.g. Foulkes and Docherty (1999), Kerswill (2003)

In Glasgow, this unexpected feature
is found exclusively in speech of
working-class adolescents
with relatively low social and
geographical mobility
(e.g. Stuart-Smith,1999)

the media themselves are happy to blame

television

especially popular soap dramas set in London, such as *EastEnders,* apparently featuring Cockney dialect ('Mockney')

Jockney = Jock (= Scot) +
                 Cock(ney)

(circ:550, 251)

2 8 JUN 2000

Cockneys are killing off the Scots accent

6455

SOAP operas like EastEnders are the most likely culprits for the growing spread of Estuary English among Glaswegian teenagers, academics claimed yesterday.

Youngsters in the city are developing a 'southern drawl' at the expense of distinctive Scottish sounds such as the 'ch' in 'loch', according to the study by Glasgow University.

Researchers found pronunciations such as 'toof' for 'tooth' are becoming more common, while traditional Glasgow variations such as 'mulk' for 'milk' are in decline. They believe the influence of TV is to blame as many of the youngsters surveyed had little direct contact English people.

Glaswegians aged 13-14 were asked to read lists of words and talk in pairs before comparing the results with people aged 40-60. Dr Jane Stuart-Smith, of the Department of English Language, said: 'The finger of suspicion points to the media and programmes like EastEnders, which are rich in Cockney accents. 'Whatever the cause, it is certain that Glasgow's accent is changing.'

The linguistic research framework: quantitative sociolinguistics
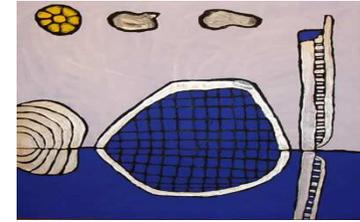
- classic sociolinguistic investigation of variation and change to features of language was formulated by William Labov (e.g. Labov 1972), and pioneered in large cities, like New York City and Glasgow

- Linguistic variables (any aspect of language which shows a number of variants) are correlated with extra-linguistic variables (any aspect of society, e.g. social class, gender, age, ethnicity)

- Language change in progress observed through the comparison of patterns of variation across age groups/times, and explained with reference to social factors/processes
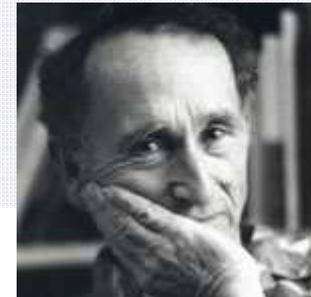
TV and language change?
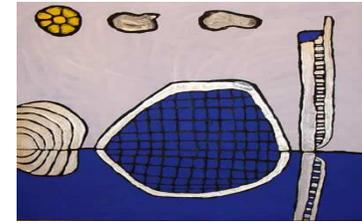
traditional view of quantitative sociolinguistics

- watching TV may affect vocabulary
- but not core features of language, e.g. pronunciation, grammar

  (e.g. Chambers, e.g. 1998, Trudgill, 1986)

- Language change primarily takes place through accommodation during face-to-face interaction
- assumption of strong media effects with 'direct' influence on behaviour

TV and language change?
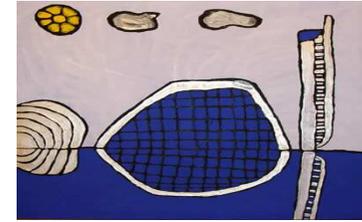
- TV may
  - increase awareness of linguistic varieties
  - and/or affect attitudes towards other varieties

  (e.g. Milroy and Milroy 1985)

- If core features of grammar are affected, this must be in some way voluntary, and/or involve imitation

  (Trudgill 1986)

and about these particular changes?
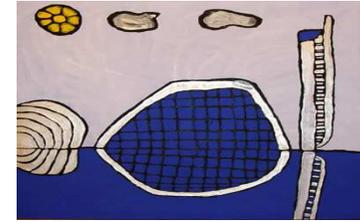
Denial of a 'causal' role for TV (Trudgill 1986: 54):

*probably a combination of factors working together*

- less overt forms of dialect contact
- attitudes towards Cockney might play a role

and – (Trudgill 1988: 44):

   '[the] sheer speed [of the change] may be due to a 'softening-up' process produced by the engendering of favourable attitudes through TV programmes'

=> TV and the media have been ignored by sociolinguists

Why linguists should consider TV? (1)
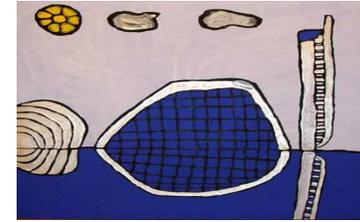
- TV is exceptionally prevalent

- Some TV programmes constitute social phenomena, e.g. the London-based soap *EastEnders* (1985-)
  - screened 4 times/week plus weekend omnibus
  - regularly attracted 18 million viewers/episode (i.e. almost one-third UK population)
  - viewing of key episodes have caused exceptional surges in electricity demand (e.g. National Grid 2001)
  - viewers can be highly engaged (e.g. Buckingham 1987)

Why linguists should consider TV? (2)
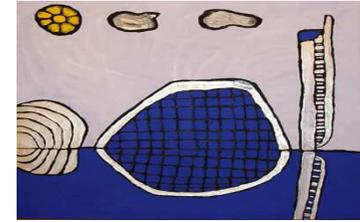
- Media are assumed to affect social behaviours

  (e.g. McQuail 2005),

but

  - TV is assumed to be a contributory factor, along with other factors (Klapper 1960: 8)
  - Audience assumed to be active interpreters of media texts (e.g. Philo 1999)

- TV and para-social interaction (e.g. Abercrombie 1996)

Why linguists should consider TV? (3)
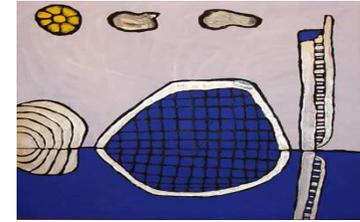
- linguists are starting to include TV:
  - 'as part of the global sociolinguistic condition'

    (Androutsopoulos 2001: 4)

  - as possible cause of language change, in German

    (e.g. Lameli 2004; Muhr 2003)

  - in accounts of language variation

    e.g. Br. Portuguese (Naro 1981, Naro and Scherre 1996);
    Ur. Portuguese (Carvalho 2004).

- and to wonder about TV in these changes

e.g. Williams and Kerswill (1999); Foulkes and Docherty (2000)

The Glasgow media project
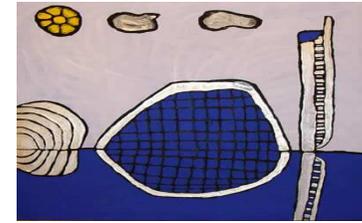
Is TV a contributory factor in accent change in adolescents?
(2002-5)
Economic and Social Research Council (R000239757)

Are the media a contributory factor in systemic language change under certain circumstances for certain individuals?

Does TV play a role in the appearance of Cockney accent features in the speech of Glaswegian adolescents?
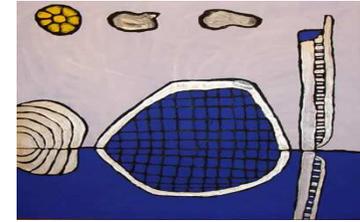
The research team

- The Research Fellow
   Claire Timmins
- The Statistician
   (Prof) Gwilym Pryce
- The Media expert
   (Prof) Barrie Gunter

- a group of kids (and adults) from Maryhill in Glasgow

Scope of the project

- **sample**
  - 36 adolescents; 12 adults (working-class)
  - longitudinal - tracks 2 age groups across 2 years
- **methods**
  - quantitative and qualitative
- **data**
  - speech: wordlist and spontaneous
  - questionnaire
  - informal interviews
 - diaries
  - television/language experiment (quiz show)

Theme for this paper: TH-fronting
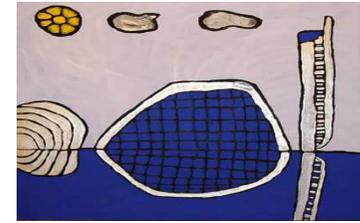
1. Is TH-fronting spreading in Glaswegian vernacular?
2. (methods)
3. If so, is this correlated with:
   a. dialect contact with Cockney and/or other dialects of English?
   b. attitudes to Cockney and/or other urban accents?
   c. watching TV programmes set in London?
   d. or these and more *together*?
4. Are Glaswegian adolescents aware of this feature in 'Cockney' shown on TV?
5. Can they successfully imitate 'media-Cockney' phonology?

   TH-fronting in wordlists is used as example

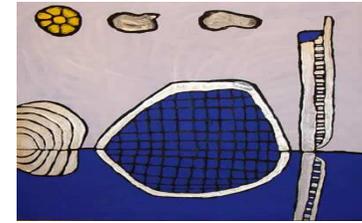# 1. TH-fronting is spreading in Glaswegian
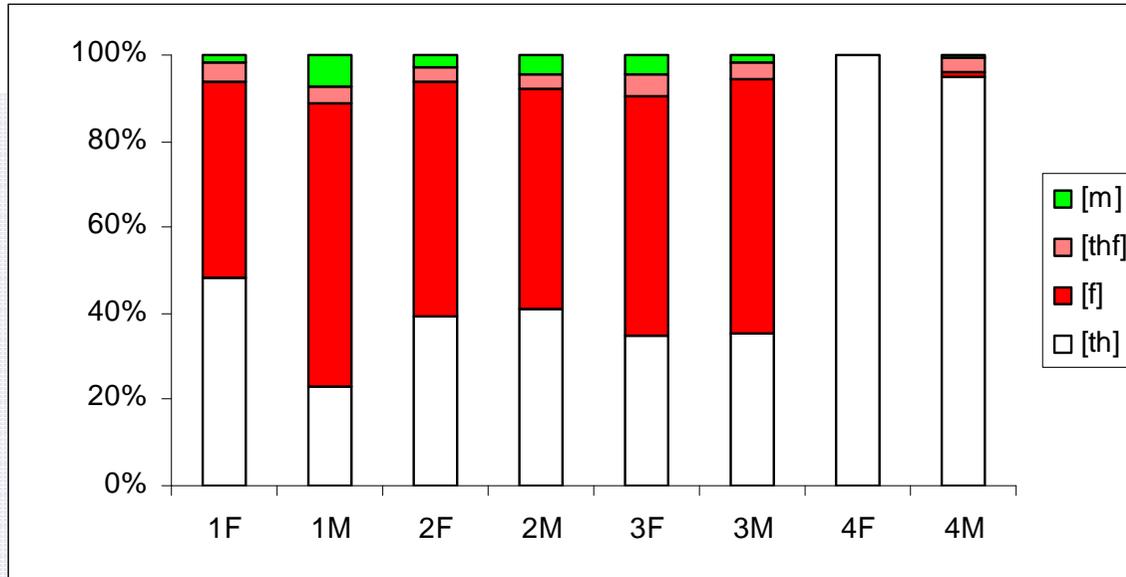
n = 951

1 = 10-11 years

2 = 12-13 years

3 = 14-15 years

4 = 40-60 years

- apparent-time change: adolescents use more [f] than adults
- real-time change: we find more [f] in 2003 than in 1997

2. Extra-linguistic variables

In addition to: linguistic (word-position); age; gender

thematic 'categories' of variables:
- dialect contact (beyond and within Glasgow)
- attitudes to accents (auditory/mental image)
- social practices/identities
- music (incl. radio)
- computers (incl. internet)
- film (incl. video/DVD)
- sport
- TV

created from questionnaire; informal interviews; conversations; participant observation

2. Statistical analysis - methodology
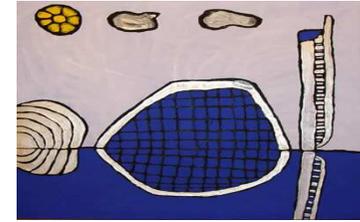
- multiple regression (logistic)
- 'general-to-specific' model
- check and remove odd variables (low response/skewed distribution)
- check for multicolinearity within each thematic category to produce list of possible variables
- run regression on category lists separately ('enter')
- draw up overall shortlist containing all significant variables from each category, plus theoretically interesting variables if not significant
- progressively run regressions ('enter') on overall shortlist until only significant variables remain.

3a. TH-fronting and dialect contact

Initial baseline criteria: informants born and raised in area

(2.8% born in England, 2001 Census)

Questionnaire and interview data revealed:

- most have a few relatives beyond Glasgow
- they talk on the telephone to these relatives more than they see them (when the relatives visit them)
- most show a low degree of active mobility outside the city.
- most have face-to-face contact with friends (and family) within Glasgow.
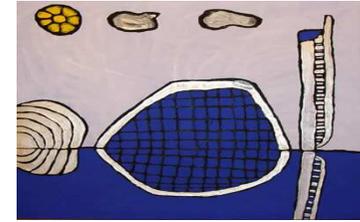
3a. TH-fronting and dialect contact
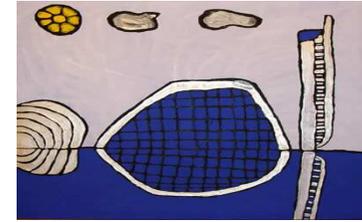
TH-fronting is linked positively with

– having relatives in the South of England

(only 8% variance explained)
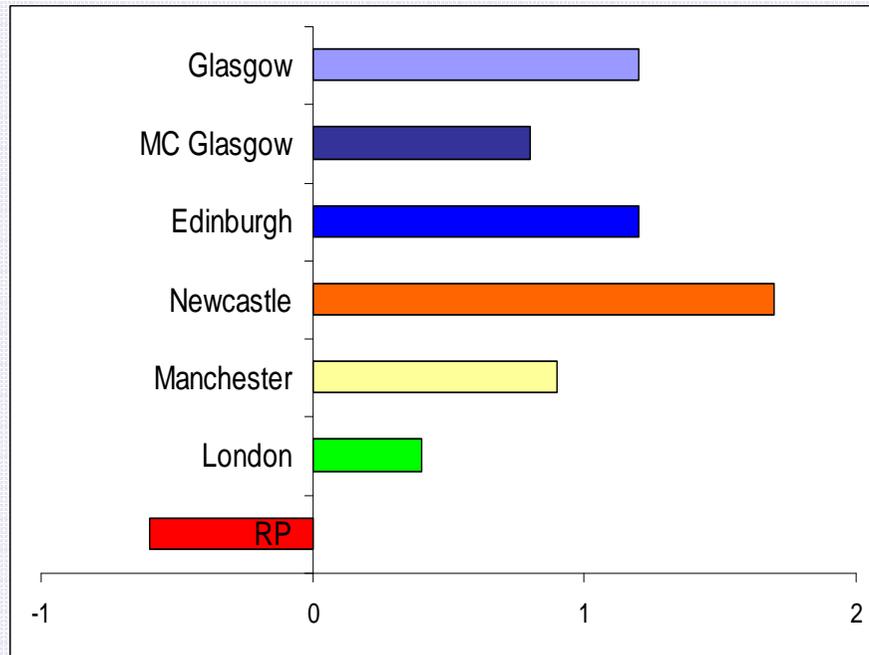
3b. TH-fronting and accent attitudes

- speech samples of 7 accents
  - female speakers same age
  - reading same passage
  - beginning of questionnaire
  - also checked identification of accents

- 'mental image' of 8 urban accents (cf Preston 1999)
  - 'what do you think of the accents in *London*?'
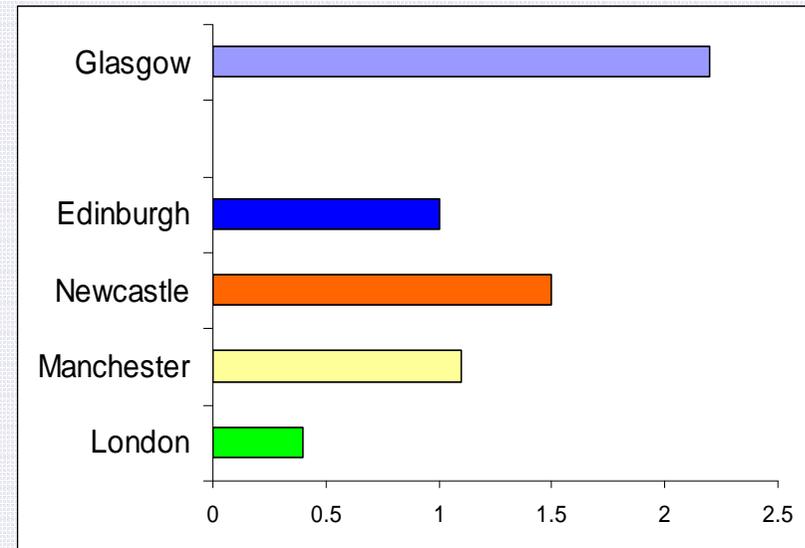 - end of questionnaire

3b. TH-fronting and accent attitudes
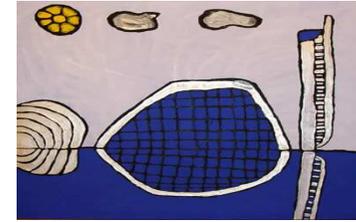
- Glasgow kids like Cockney, but less than other accents

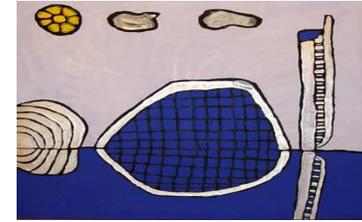Speech samples   mental image

average responses for all informants

(scale: less positive ……….. more positive)
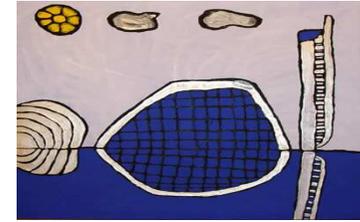
3b. TH-fronting and accent attitudes

TH-fronting is linked positively with

- liking the Cockney speech sample
- and liking the Manchester speech sample

- but negatively with liking an Edinburgh accent ('posh')

(only 12% variance explained)

3b. TV as 'softening-up' agent?

- Are positive attitudes towards Cockney the result of watching popular programmes set in London (i.e. Trudgill's 'softening-up')?

- We tested this claim statistically using multiple regression analysis to find out which variables might be linked with holding positive attitudes to Cockney.

- The only significant result was in fact a **negative** link between liking the Cockney speech sample and watching *EastEnders.*
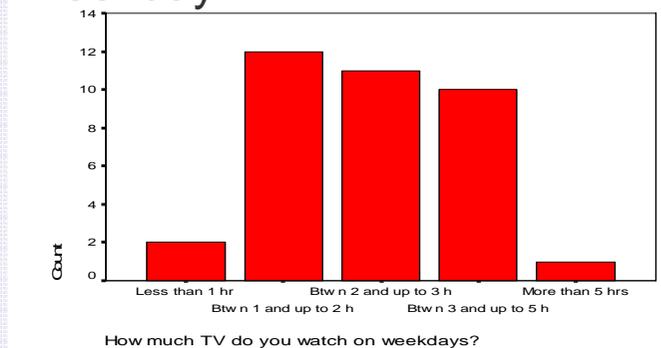
3c. TH-fronting and TV
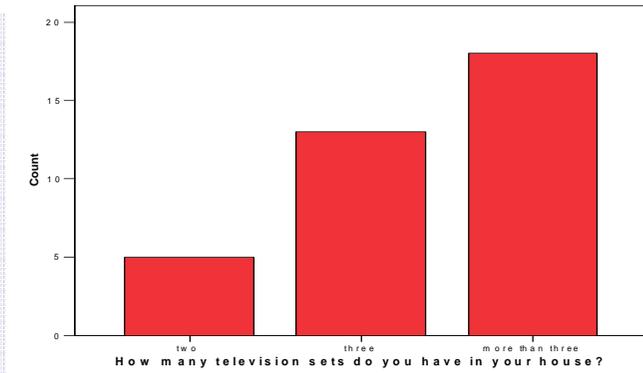
many have 3 or more TV sets
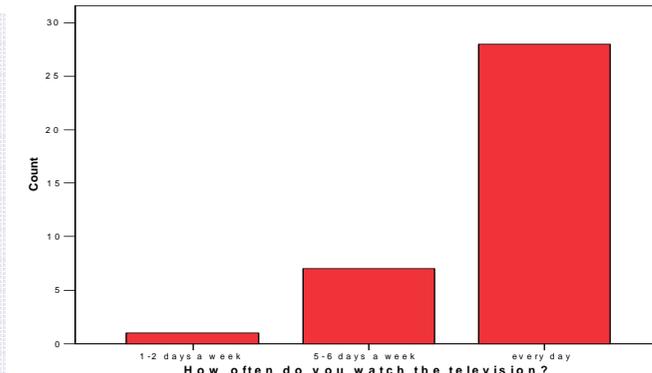
most watch TV every day

weekday

weekend
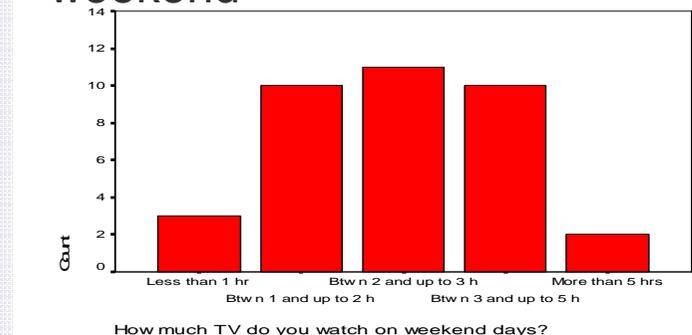
self-reported TV exposure of between 1 to 5 hours a day (av. 3hrs)

3c. They watch and like *EastEnders* most

watch

like
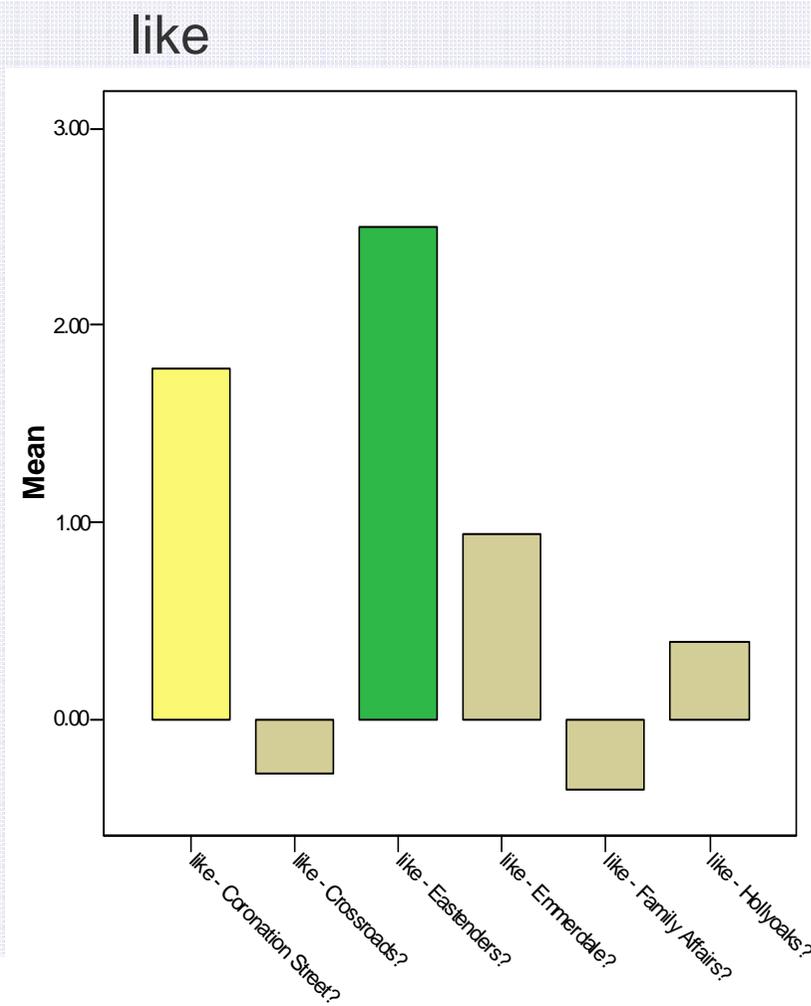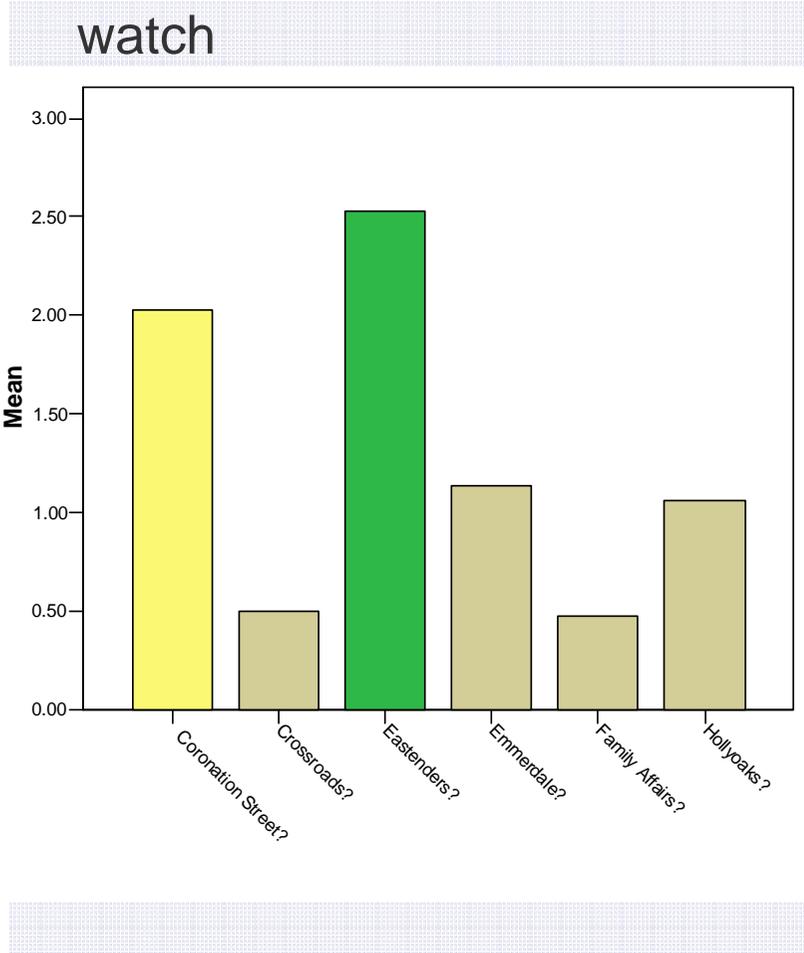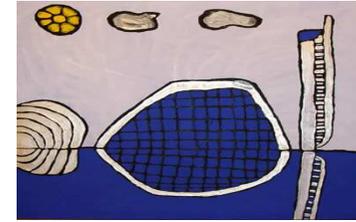
07/03/07   Is Mockney cree|

3c. TH-fronting occurs (variably) in *EastEnders*

All positions TH _ EastEnders

Characters: BILLY, PEGGY, PHIL, LITTLE, PAUL, PAT, IAN, SHARON, SAM, RICKY, ALFIE, NATALIE, SONIA, SPENCER, KAT, KELLY

Legend: 0, f, th
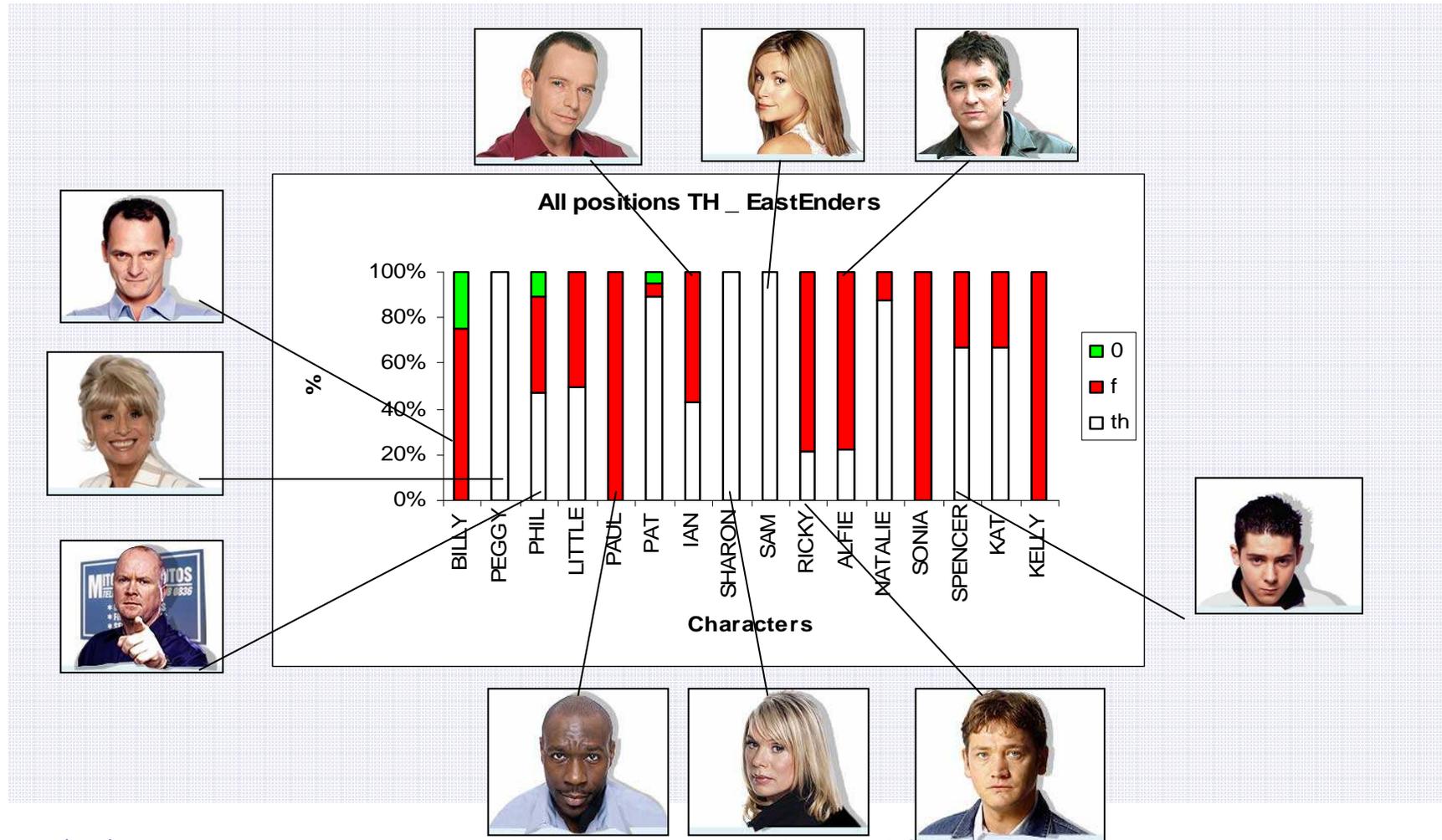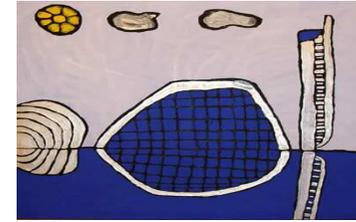
3c. TH-fronting and TV

TH-fronting is linked positively with

- giving *EastEnders* as favourite programme
- criticizing soap characters
- liking *EastEnders* (also *The Bill*, London police drama)

but negatively with

- general exposure to TV; watching Scottish, Northern, and US-based dramas
- reported talking about TV whilst watching TV
- talking about TV programmes in the conversations

(only around 5% variance explained)

3d. TH-fronting – a combination of factors
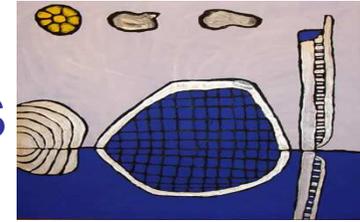
our statistical model was designed to consider a *range* of 'social' factors *together*:

- dialect contact
- attitudes to accents
- TV

and

- social practices/identities
- music (incl. radio)
- computers (incl. internet)
- film (incl. video/DVD)
- sport
- age
- gender
- (and linguistic: word position)

3d. TH-fronting across categories

Reg 1: n=756; r^2=.377; Reg 2: n=756; r^2=.358; Reg 3: n=756; r^2=.354

3. Interpreting the results
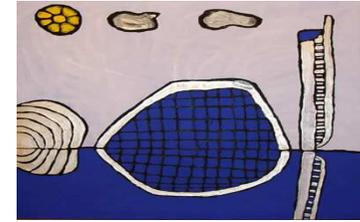
- a number of factors are involved in the spread of TH-fronting in Glasgow
- the correlations with TV
  - may stand for another factor unaccounted for within the model, e.g. possibly covert positive attitudes towards Cockney (e.g. Tore Kristiansen, pc, cf. Kristiansen (2003))
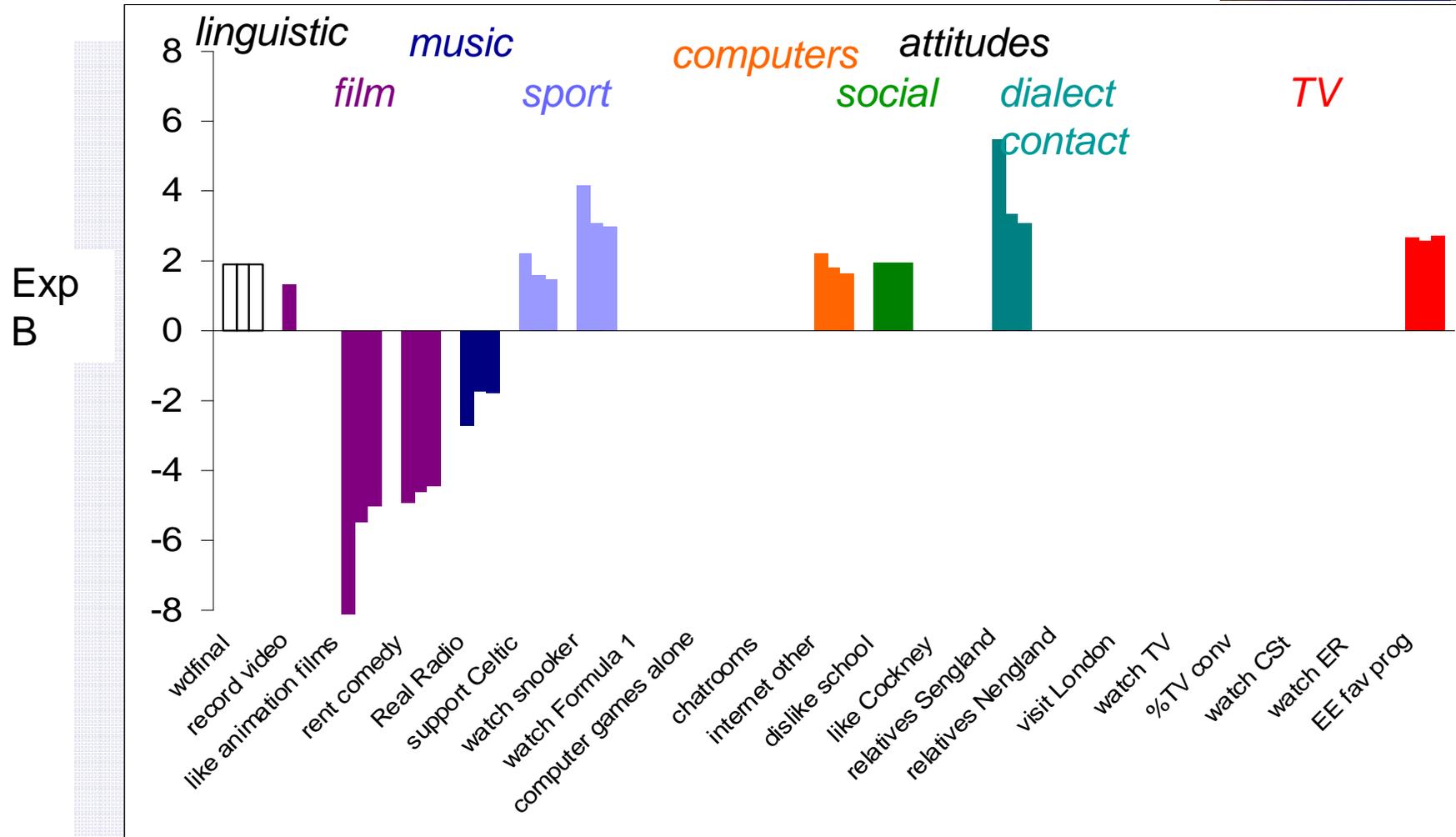 - may refer to those adolescents, who show TH-fronting, and who also prefer *EastEnders*/other programmes set in London
  - may result – in some way – from their engagement with popular programmes set in London

    NB other significant factors in model are unlikely to be assumed to have a direct causal effect on the production of TH-fronting, e.g. using chatrooms, disliking school.

4. Awareness of 'media-Cockney'?
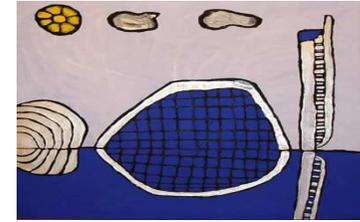
- Explored using informal imitation task (boys only) given during informal interview (cf Preston 1992)
  - informants shown a set of picture cards
  - asked to pronounce words first in their own accent
  - shown a picture of a leading actor from *EastEnders*
  - asked to talk about his accent and theirs
  - asked to say words again, but with the same accent as the actor

  - Fine phonetic analysis of the pairs of words

4. Awareness of media-Cockney
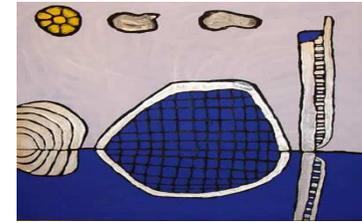
All children thought the actor's accent was different from theirs

- *'he's from a different place … just different'*
- *'English'   'he's fae England'   's just … pure English, no?'*
- *'English snobby'   'says it posher'*

- *'It's like a sore throat accent … or … they took his tonsils oot or something'*
- *'Ah 'hink they pronounce more'*
- *'He changes the letters, if it was 'f' he'd use 'v''*

- *'he talks different' 'he talks more tough'*
- *'It's aw right … I wouldnae like to speak like it but'*

4. Imitation of media-Cockney
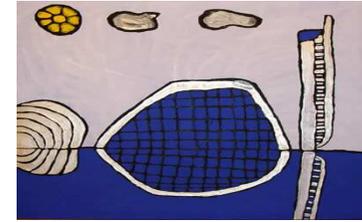
- Our first impressions were that little had been changed

- BUT close phonetic analysis revealed that most children altered at least something in response to the task

- Not imitation so much as **phonetic alteration**

Concluding remarks
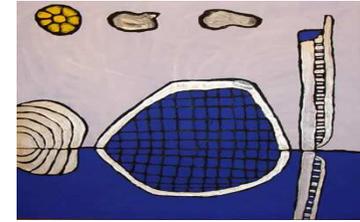
- These results need to be taken in conjunction with other results from the project
  - e.g. other variables also showing similar results
  - language/TV experiment, which seems to reveal subtle indications of variation linked to TV
  - qualitative data from spontaneous speech and participant observation

- We suspect that understanding the data requires a shift of perspective, specifically to one which emphasizes watching TV as a socio-culturally embedded activity during which viewers appropriate such elements as fit their own view of the world ('communicative appropriation'), cf. e.g. Holly et al (2001).

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