

ON THE REVERSIBILITY OF MERGERS:  
/W/, /V/ AND EVIDENCE FROM LESSER-KNOWN ENGLISHES<sup>1</sup>

PETER TRUDGILL – DANIEL SCHREIER – DANIEL LONG – JEFFREY P. WILLIAMS

Conventional linguistic wisdom has it that mergers cannot be reversed: “it is generally agreed that mergers are irreversible: once a merger, always a merger” (Labov 1994: 311). The reason for this is clear: once two phonemes have converged, speakers have no way of knowing which one of the two original units belongs in which one of the two original lexical sets, and restoration is impossible. As is well known, however, there are a number of reports in the historical linguistics literature of phonological mergers which have been reversed. One often quoted example is that of the merger in English of the lexical sets of MATE and MEAT, which is well-attested from earlier periods of the language, but which is not found in any modern variety of English.

This “once a merger, always a merger” maxim has quite naturally led historical linguists to consider how to explain these reports of mergers which have been reversed. In earlier work on this topic, historical linguists (e.g. Kökeritz 1953) typically employed explanations for this puzzling phenomenon which were based on dialect contact. They agreed that mergers could not be reversed as such, but their thesis was that while, say, MATE and MEAT were indeed genuinely merged in some dialects, the merger was later undone as a result of contact between speakers of these dialects and speakers of other dialects where it had not occurred. That is, speakers were able to accurately repair the merger by consulting the distribution of vowels over lexical sets in the speech of speakers of the non-merging dialects. Wyld (1956: 210) writes that we have to assume that the MATE and MEAT part of the English vowel system was “differentiated among different classes of speakers – whether in a Regional or a Class dialect I am unable at present to say – into two types”, and that the unmerger was not a sound change as such but “merely the result of the abandonment of one type of pronunciation and the adoption of another” (1956: 211).

More recently, a brilliant and pioneering alternative explanation has been advanced by Labov. This is that these mergers were never actually mergers at all but rather “near-mergers”. That is, they may have been perceived and spelt and reported as mergers because of a very close phonetic proximity between the two phonemes concerned. Labov (1994: 349-70) discusses this issue at considerable length. He cites several instances of speakers being able to produce a very small phonetic distinction

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1 We are very grateful to Karen Lavarello-Schreier for her help with Tristanian and St Helenian English, and to Anders Källgård for his magnanimous and invaluable help with Pitcairnese. We would also like to thank Walt Wolfram for his information on earlier forms of English in North Carolina.

without being able to perceive it. How they do this, however, is, as Labov says (1994: 371), “not at all clear”. These small differences are big enough to be apparent to investigating linguists but are not observed by speakers themselves. Trudgill (1974) cites speakers in Norwich in minimal pairs tests claiming a merger of the lexical sets of NEAR and SQUARE by reading aloud and commenting on, for example, the pair *here* and *hair* as follows: ‘[hɛː:], [hɛː:] – yes, they’re the same’. Normally this very close approximation, we have to suppose, represents a stage on the way to a complete merger – as has indeed subsequently proved to be the case in Norwich (Trudgill 1988). However, on occasion, the two phonemes, because a total merger has not actually taken place, can at a later date subsequently move phonetically further apart again, leading to reports of unmergers as in the case of MEAT and MATE.

All the reversed and therefore, according to the Labovian thesis, near-mergers discussed in the literature so far have concerned vowels (cf. Labov 1994: 349-90). In this paper we discuss a well-known but little discussed phonological merger in English which, however, involves consonants. The merger is of especial interest because, if that is what it was, it has clearly been totally reversed in the geographical area for which it was reported, namely the southeast of England. In this paper we examine what is known about this merger and attempt an examination of the viability, in its case, of the “dialect contact” versus the “near-merger” theses. We accept that the modern examples of near-mergers cited by Labov are entirely convincing, and we are very happy to accept this thesis as the correct explanation for apparent unmergers in many historical cases. Here, however, we ask whether the dialect-contact thesis may not in other cases be correct also.

The facts concerning this merger as they are generally reported are that in at least many of the local varieties spoken in the southeast of England in at least the 18th and 19th centuries, prevocalic /v/ in items like *village* was replaced by /w/. Most reports focus on word-initial /w/ in items such as *village*, *victuals*, *vegetables*, *vermin*, and although many writers do not actually say so, the impression one receives is that [v] then occurred only in non-prevocalic position i.e. in items such as *love*, with the consequence that [w] and [v] were, presumably, in complementary distribution and /w/ and /v/ were no longer distinct.

### 1. Reports of the merger

Some of the reports of this merger are the following:

- 1) Ellis (1889) describes the southeast of 19th century England as being, at the Traditional Dialect level, the “land of wee” (as opposed to /v/).
- 2) Wright (1905: 227) says that “initial and medial v has become w in mid-Buckinghamshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Kent, east Sussex”. This geographical configuration might lead one to suppose that it was a feature of Hertfordshire dialect also.
- 3) Wakelin (1972: 95-6) writes that the SED materials show that:

“In parts of southern England, notably East Anglia and the south-east, initial and medial [v] may appear as [w], cf. V.7.19 *vinegar*, IV.9.4 *viper* (under *adder*), V.8.2 *victuals* (under *food*)..... The use of [w] for [v] was a well-known Cockney feature up to the last century.”

Wakelin (1972: 96) hypothesises that “the area in which [v] > [w] was perhaps coextensive with the voicing area”. This seems to be wrong, however, since the voicing area he is referring to here is the area in which voiceless fricatives became voiced fricatives in initial position. This area most certainly did not include East Anglia.

- 4) Wakelin (1984: 79) also says that “Old East Anglian and south-eastern dialect is noted for its pronunciation of initial /v/ as /w/ in, e.g., *vinegar*, *viper*; a very old feature, which was preserved in Cockney up to the last century”.
- 5) Further examination of the published SED materials shows other sporadic instances of this merger. The spontaneous responses to VIII.3.2, for instance, show *very* with initial /w/ in Buckland and Coleshill, Buckinghamshire ; and in Grimston, North Elmham, Ludham, Reedham, and Pulham St Mary, Norfolk. Many of the other SED instances of /w/ are from reports in which informants have labelled this pronunciation “older”.
- 6) Certainly Norfolk was one of the areas in which this merger lasted longest. In a paper on vestigial dialect variants, Trudgill (1999) discusses the current high stereotype-level of awareness of this feature in the county even though it has totally vanished from actual usage. The merger is ‘remembered’ by the local community decades after its actual disappearance. Most local people in the area over a certain age ‘know’ that *village* used to be pronounced *willage* and that *very* used to be pronounced *wery*. The longevity of this folk memory is rather remarkable. As a child, Trudgill regularly associated with Traditional Dialect speakers who were born as early as the 1860s. However, he never heard anyone use this feature except as a joke or quotation. Discussions with older Norfolk people suggest that it was in widespread normal unselfconscious use only until the 1920s. The fact that modern dialect writers still use the feature is therefore highly noteworthy. For example, Michael Brindred in his local dialect column in the Norwich-based Eastern Daily Press of August 26th, 1998 writes *anniversary* <anniwersary>. This dialect feature has remained a stereotype for generations after its disappearance from actual speech.

This Norfolk folk memory concurs with the SED materials and suggests that the change [v] > [w] indeed took place only in syllable initial position, and that [v] was still retained in words such as *love*. We can assume, therefore, that there was, as suggested above, a single phoneme /w/ which had two allophones, [w] in syllable-initial and [v] in syllable final position.

A merger of /v/ and /w/ is not too surprising. The functional load of this opposition in English is rather low. Minimal pairs are very few. However, the merger has clearly been reversed, as we said above: no native English speaker anywhere in England now

fails to contrast /w/ and /v/. The principle concerning the irreversibility of mergers therefore suggests that we should consider very carefully if the reports of a merger can in fact be correct. We have to ask: was there a genuine merger which has been reversed or was it simply a near-merger?

Since the difference between apparent and genuine mergers is a matter of fine phonetic detail, it would be useful if we could accurately reconstruct the details of the reported /w/ – /v/ merger. It is impossible now, however, to reassemble the phonetic details of what happened in England since there are now no native speakers of English anywhere in the British Isles who have this feature and, if Norfolk is typical, nor have there been for several decades. Neither is the merger to be found anywhere in the major colonial varieties of English: American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and South African English do not have it.

However, an avenue of exploration is opened up to us by the fact that the merger is a feature which reportedly makes an appearance in the phonologies of a large number of lesser-known colonial varieties of English spoken in small communities in the North Atlantic, South Atlantic, North Pacific and South Pacific. It is to these varieties therefore that our discussion now turns. Our thesis is that small isolated communities may produce slower rates of linguistic change (cf. Trudgill 2001) and that, if this is the case, these varieties may in some respects be more representative of earlier stages of English as this was spoken in England than modern English English itself. If we can show that these varieties genuinely do have a merger, then we can hypothesise that it is present in these varieties as a result of having been transported to the locations concerned in the phonologies of speakers from the southeast of England. That is, these varieties have retained an originally south of England feature which has been lost in its original homeland. Similarly, if it emerges that these varieties have a near-merger, we can hypothesise that this, instead, was what was transported from England.

## 2. Reports of mergers in Lesser Known Englishes

We have located the following reports of the merger in lesser-known varieties of English:

### **North Atlantic**

#### *Bermuda*

Ayres (1933: 10) reports a merger of /w/ and /v/ (see below).

#### *Bahamas*

Wells (1982: 589) reports for one white Bahamian English speaker “the phonemic merger of standard /v/ and /w/ into a single phoneme with the allophones [w] and [v] in complementary distribution. The [w] allophone occurs in initial position...but the [v] allophone elsewhere”.

#### *Montserrat*

Wells (1982: 568) reports *village* as occurring with initial [w].

*St Vincent*

Wells (1982: 568) writes that “Vincentians are among those for whom the use of [w] for standard [v] has been reported”.

*Bay Islands*

According to Warantz (1983: 84), the phonology of the native English of the Bay Islands off the coast of Honduras has “the merging of /w/ and /v/ in certain environments”.

**South Atlantic***Tristan da Cunha*

Tristan English is reported as having the merger by Zettersten. In his discussion of consonants he writes: “[v] > [w]: [weri] ‘very’” (1969: 72).

*St Helena*

Schreier et al. (in press) write that “phonologically, the most salient characteristics of basilectal St Helena English include ... the V-W merger”.

**North Pacific***Bonin Islands*

According to Long (1998; 2000a; 2000b), /v/ and /w/ are merged, and [v] and [w] are in complementary distribution.

**South Pacific***Pitcairn*

Ross and Moverley (1964: 154) claim that in Pitcairnese /v/ is generally [w] in word-initial, word-final and intervocalic position. They say that there is no evidence that the merger took place in preconsonantal position, where /v/ is realised as [v]. Actually, however, since /w/ does not occur in preconsonantal position in English, this would in fact appear to be evidence of a merger, since [w] and [v] are in complementary distribution according to this description.

*Norfolk Island*

Flint (1964: 196ff.) reports for [w] in *valley* and *invitation*.

*Palmerston*

Ehrhart-Kneher (1996: 530) shows that Palmerston has both [v] and [w]. For words derived from English/w/, her data show [w] as in *ui* ‘we’, *uan* ‘one’, and *uash* ‘wash’. For etymonic /v/, there is variation between [w] and [v], apparently in complementary distribution. In medial and final position, all examples show [v], as in *ev* ‘have’. In initial position, however, /v/ consistently becomes [w] as in *ueri* ‘very’. This seems to suggest a total merger of original /v/ and /w/.

### 3. The substratum problem

Thus in eleven different varieties of English in widely separated areas of the world, a genuine merger of /v/ and/w/ has been reported. This would seem on the face of it to represent good evidence that this same merger did in fact take place in the southeast of England, whence it was exported to these colonial varieties overseas, but where it has now disappeared. However, there is an important reason why these reports of the W-V confusion cannot, without further examination, unambiguously be interpreted – as colonial remnants of a phenomenon which has disappeared in the mother country – as evidence for the merger in England. This is that there is an alternative explanation which could be advanced, namely a substratum effect deriving from the influence of other languages which these colonial varieties of English may have come into contact with. Let us now consider these in turn.

#### **The North Atlantic**

##### *The Bahamas*

The Bahamas consists of an archipelago of about 700 islands to the southeast of Florida, with a population of about 270,000. Serious English involvement began in 1648 when Bermuda was suffering from religious disputes and Captain William Sayle, a former governor, decided to look for an island where religious dissidents could worship. He sailed to the Bahamas with about 70 settlers, Bermudian dissidents and others who had come directly from England. Their plantation colony was largely unsuccessful, and a number of settlers returned to Bermuda. Other Bermudian migrants continued to arrive, however, and the island of New Providence was settled from Bermuda in 1656. After the American Revolution, from 1782 onwards, many American Loyalists also fled to the Bahamas, which had the effect of doubling the white population. The English of white Bahamians, then, has two main sources: the Bermudian English of the original settlers, and the North American English of the Loyalists. Some of the Loyalists were from the American South, but Abaco and northern Eleuthera islands in particular were settled by Americans from New England and New York (Holm – Shilling 1982). There was also some later white immigration from the Miskito coast of Central America when this area was ceded by Britain to Spain in 1786, and Andros island in particular was settled from there. There are certainly linguistic differences between the different islands of the Bahamas to this day. It is possible then that the /v/ – /w/ merger, rather than arriving directly from England, came from Bermuda or from Central America, from where we have also reports of the merger. Holm, however, argues for a different explanation. A majority of the modern population of the Bahamas is of African descent. Black Bahamians too have different origins (cf. Holm 1980), some being descended from slaves who actually arrived in the Bahamas directly, others being originally from the Caribbean or the American South – the post 1782 immigration had the effect of trebling the black population since many Loyalists brought their slaves with them. According to Holm and Shilling (1982: vii), Black Bahamian English is probably most like the mainland American Creole Gullah. It is certainly “closer to white English than comparable varieties in the Caribbean

proper, but much further from white English than the vernacular Black English of the United States". Holm argues strongly that the Bahamian V-W confusion is the result of African influence. This is also an origin countenanced for the West Indies as a whole by Wells, who writes "it is not clear whether this phenomenon ... arose independently in the West Indies through the influence of an African substratum lacking /v/" (1982: 568). This is a possibility we have to consider since Welmers (1973: 52) states that typical West African consonant systems have /w/ but no /v/, a point which is supported by Clements (2000: 125). Ewe, on the other hand, has /w/ as well as /β/ and /v/ (Ladefoged 1968: 25), and also, according to Clements (2000: 127), /ϕ/.

Holm argues further that the presence of the merger in white speech is the result of influence from the majority black population.

#### *The Bay Islands*

The Bay Islands are a group of 8 small islands about 55 km off the northern Honduras coast. They were first sighted by Columbus in 1502 and were settled in 1642 by English buccaneers. Between 1650 and 1850 Spain, Honduras, and England disputed ownership of the islands. The islands were officially annexed by Britain in 1852 but were then ceded to Honduras in 1859. White English-speaking Protestants formed the majority of the population until about 1900, when Hispanic Hondurans from the mainland began settling, but indigenous anglophones still form about 85% of the population. The population is currently about 20,000, black, white and mixed. An African substratum cannot be ruled out here, but seems less likely than in the Bahamas.

#### *Bermuda*

Bermuda is a British colony about 900 km east of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA. The first anglophones to arrive were English Puritans who were shipwrecked in 1609. In 1612, 60 English settlers were sent to colonise the islands and Bermuda became a crown colony in 1684. African slaves were transported to Bermuda as early as 1616, and soon the black population was larger than the white one. Today about 60% of the population are of African origin; whites are mostly of British origin, but descendants of Portuguese labourers from Madeira and the Azores who arrived during the 1800s are also to be found and some Portuguese is still spoken. There are noticeable differences between the speech of blacks and whites, the former being more Caribbean in character, the latter more like the English of coastal South Carolina (cf. Trudgill 1986). Once again, an African substratum has to be considered.

A further complication is that there were a large number of historical connections between these three different communities. There was considerable to-ing and fro-ing of anglophones between the Bahamas and Bermuda, as well as between the Bay Islands of Honduras, the Caymans, and the Bahamas (Parsons 1954). We cannot exclude the possibility therefore that in any one of these territories, the merger arrived not from England but from one of the others.

## **The South Atlantic**

### *St Helena*

There is a clear substratum problem with the English of St Helena as well. This island is situated in the South Atlantic Ocean, 1,930 km west of Angola. Its nearest neighbour is Ascension Island, approximately 1,100 kilometres to the northwest. St Helena's population of approximately 6,000 is of mixed European, African and Asian origin. English is the only language spoken on the island. From the time when it was claimed by the British East India Company in 1658, a concerted policy of settlement was implemented, and Company employees (soldiers and servants) and 'planters' were recruited to St Helena, along with slaves supplied on request by EIC ships. Little is known about the origins of the British settlers but there is some evidence that most of them came from southern England. Even less is known about the origins of the non-white population, but various records show that slaves were imported from the Guinea Coast, the Indian sub-continent and Madagascar, and to a lesser extent from the Cape, the West Indies, Malaya and the Maldives. St Helenian English, which is perhaps best described as a creoloid, is thus the result of contacts between regional dialects of English English and many other languages. An African or other substratum origin for the V-W confusion is thus possible.

### *Tristan da Cunha*

This British dependent territory consists of six small islands which are about half-way between southern Africa and South America. The only populated island, Tristan da Cunha, has an area of about 100 square km and a population of about 290. It is said to be the most remote permanently inhabited settlement in the world, the nearest habitation being St Helena, which is about 2,300 km away. The islands were discovered in 1506 by a Portuguese sailor, Tristao da Cunha. A British garrison was stationed on Tristan da Cunha in 1816, as a result of fears that it might be used as a base for an attempt to rescue Napoleon from St Helena (see above) and the islands were formally annexed by Britain. When the garrison was withdrawn the following year, three British soldiers, one of them with his wife and children, obtained permission to stay behind and settle permanently. In the 1820s shipwrecked sailors and castaways from all parts of the British Isles added to the population, and six women, some of whom seem to have been freed non-white slaves, immigrated from St Helena in 1827, one of them with four daughters. In the 1830s and 1840s several US American whalers arrived, as well as three non-anglophone seamen: a Dutchman and two Danes. The population increased rapidly and by 1842 the island community consisted of 10 families with 75 people. There were thus three influential groups in the community's early formation period. First, the British group, the colony's founders, consisting of soldiers, castaways and shipwrecked sailors from the British Isles; second, the women who arrived from St Helena in 1827; and third, the US American whalers and European sailors who settled between 1833 and 1849. There was very little trade with passing ships in the second half of the 19th century and the influx of settlers declined drastically, the only newcomers being a weaver from Yorkshire in the 1860s, two

stranded sailors from Italy who settled in 1892, and two Irish sisters who arrived in 1908. Despite repeated language contact at various stages of the formation process, the present-day population is entirely anglophone. Sociohistorically, there were three types of contact: dialect contact between the British and American dialects spoken by the anglophone founders; language contact between English and the native tongues of the non-anglophone settlers (i.e. Dutch, Danish and Italian); and contact with the English-based creoloid (or creole or pidgin) spoken by the women from St Helena. It is possible that the V-W merger on Tristan could therefore have an origin in southern England; and/or in influence from Dutch and/or Danish and/or Italian; and/or in African influence via the English of St Helena.

### **The North Pacific**

#### *Bonin Islands*

These Japanese-owned islands, known in Japanese as Ogasawara-gunto, are in the central Pacific Ocean, about 800 km southeast of Japan proper. The population is about 2,000. The islands were discovered by the Spanish navigator Ruy Lopez de Villalobos in 1543. They were claimed by the U.S. in 1823 and by Britain in 1825. They were formally annexed by Japan in 1876, but after World War II, they were placed under U.S. military control, and returned to Japan in 1968. The originally uninhabited islands were first settled in 1830 by fifteen people: five seamen – two Americans, one Englishman, one Dane, and one Italian; and ten Hawaiians, five men and five women. This founding population was later joined by whalers, shipwrecked sailors, and drifters of many different origins.

The English of the islands appears to be mainly American in origin and has many similarities with New England varieties (cf. Long 1998; Long 2000a; 2000b). Immigration from Japan is currently being followed by language shift to Japanese.

The English phoneme /v/ corresponds to three different variants in Bonin English. The first variant [v] is distinguished as a separate phoneme and is commonly found among speakers (middle-aged today) who grew up during the United States Navy's administration of the island, attending the Navy school and, in many cases, advancing on to high school in Guam. This mid-20th century infusion of American English into the community surely strengthened the usage of [v], but social circumstances in the later 19th century (mentioned below), indicate that [v] may have been used on the islands before World War II as well. The second variant, pronounced as [b], represents a merger of /v/ and /b/. This variant is common among speakers (in their sixties and above today) whose English was acquired prior to World War II, when native speakers of Japanese formed the majority of the population. In this era, English was generally restricted to private situations, whereas Japanese was the language of wider communication, including formal education. Japanese has no /v/, which typically becomes [b] in English loanwords in Japanese. The third variant of /v/ is [w], and its origin is more difficult to pin down to a single specific cause. The variant would appear to predate [v] and [b] on the islands, and is clearly heard on tapes of the speaker we refer to as Clarence, who was born on Chichijima in the 1880s. He consistently uses

[w] in syllable-initial position and [v] in preconsonantal and syllable-final position, as per the reports from southeast England.

Substratum influence concerning [w] is difficult to evaluate. Many specifics of 19th century Bonin English will probably forever remain a mystery; only piecemeal information exists. We do, however, know the following facts. The early settlers of the island were a multiethnic band whose native tongues consisted of English, Portuguese, Hawaiian, Chamorro and at least a dozen other European and Pacific Island languages. Native speakers of English were a tiny minority in the community and almost all households consisted of speakers of differing languages. A variety of English was used as the common language of the tiny community, and it is often described as being 'broken'. At the same time, however, some islanders had exposure to mainstream (non-contact) varieties of English through off-island experiences such as attending English schools on the Japanese mainland. Circumstantial and anecdotal evidence indicates that a continuum existed in late 19th and early 20th century ranging from a mainstream variety of English to a local contact variety. Within the context of the islands' settlement history, two possibilities present themselves to account for the usage for /w/-/v/merger. One is that it results from the English spoken by the large number of Polynesian (and other Oceanic language) speakers living on the island in the 19th century. Hawaiian has no contrast between /v/ and /w/: according to Elbert and Pukui (1979: 12-13) /w/ is [w] on Kaua'i and Ni'ihau, [v] on Hawaii, with [v] and [w] occurring as allophonic variants on the other Hawaiian islands. There is evidence that this leads to confusion between /v/ and /w/ in the English of Hawaiians and other Polynesians, but nothing to indicate the kind of complementary distribution found on the Bonins. The other is of course that it arrived in the phonologies a native-English-speaking settlers: two early settlers (both males) who exerted a tremendous degree of influence over the community were native speakers of English whose home regions we can pinpoint. One was from Wallington, Surrey, England – crucially in the southeastern merger area; the other from Bradford, Massachusetts in the United States.

### **The South Pacific**

#### *Pitcairn*

Pitcairn is an isolated British colony about 2,200 km southeast of Tahiti in the south Pacific. The main and only inhabited island has an area of about 5 square km, and the population in 1992 was 52. The modern population, as is well known, is descended from the mutineers of the British ship HMS Bounty and their Tahitian companions. After a lengthy stay on Tahiti, the crew, led by the first mate, Fletcher Christian, mutinied when their voyage to the West Indies had got only as far as western Polynesia, and set their captain William Bligh and a number of loyal sailors adrift. They headed back to Tahiti, where they collected a number of local women and a few men, and from where, fearing discovery by the Royal Navy, many of them set off again. They reached Pitcairn in 1790, where, in the interests of secrecy, they burnt their ship. The island community survived undiscovered until found by American whalers in 1808. It is therefore possible that the

merger in Pitcairn English could be the result of Tahitian influence. There is no contrast between /v/ and /w/ in Tahitian: Tryon (1970: 2) writes that Tahitian /v/ is “phonetically [v], as in *vine*” but that “v is sometimes pronounced w, as a free variant; it is also realised as [β]”. Even if the Pitcairn merger does have an origin in English, moreover, there is no guarantee that this was in English English: one of the mutineers, Edward Young, came from St Kitts in the Caribbean, some areas of which, as we have already noted, are reported to have the merger themselves.

#### *Norfolk Island*

Norfolk Island is an Australian dependent territory in the southwestern Pacific, about 1,600 km northeast of Sydney. The island, with an area of 35 square km, has a population of about 2,000. In 1856 the Pitcairn Islanders, descendants of the mutineers on the *Bounty*, were resettled on Norfolk because of overcrowding on Pitcairn. Not all of the islanders were happy, however, and eventually two separate groups returned to Pitcairn. Norfolk island’s current population includes about one third who can claim to be the descendants of mutineers, the remainder being descendants of later settlers, mostly from Australia and New Zealand. Since Norfolk Island English has its origins on Pitcairn, the same problems in ascribing an origin in England to this phenomenon occur.

#### *Palmerston*

Palmerston English is a variety spoken on Palmerston Island, Polynesian *Avarau*, a coral atoll in the Cook Islands about 430 kilometres northwest of Rarotonga, by descendants of Cook Island Maori and English speakers. What we know about the settlement is that William Marsters, a ship’s carpenter and cooper from Gloucestershire, England, came to uninhabited Palmerston Atoll in 1862. He had three wives, all from Penrhyn/Tongareva in the Northern Cook Islands. He forced his wives, 17 children and numerous grandchildren to use English all the time. Virtually the entire population of the island today descends from the patriarch. Ehrhart-Kneher (1996) considers Palmerston English to be a dialectal variety of English rather than a contact language. She writes that it appears to be a classic case of mixing and vernacularization of a type which has “produced languages which, while new languages, are varieties of English rather than new languages without genetic affiliation in the usual sense”. While her analysis focuses on syntax and we cannot ignore her disclaimer that “the transcription used here makes no phonological claims” (Ehrhart-Kneher 1996: 524), she is nonetheless a trained linguist and has based her transcriptions on the IPA alphabet. Once again, the substratum problem is evident since Penrhyn/Tongarevan has /v/, but no /w/ (Clark 1976 : 20, quoting Yasuda, 1968).

#### 4. Summary

It would be possible, then, to argue that these Lesser Known Englishes provide no evidence as to the nature of the /w/-/v/ merger in England. In every case, it is possible to argue that the merger was not imported from England at all but is the result of direct or indirect interference from languages other than English which had no /w/ – /v/

distinction. After all, only a very few of the world's languages have this distinction. An examination of Maddieson (1985) shows that 76% of his sample languages have /w/, but only 21% have /v/, and a mere 11% percent of the languages in his sample have both /v/ and /w/.

Our own feeling, however, is that the presence of this merger in so many different varieties of English in so many different parts of the world – as we shall see, we have discovered 17 such varieties so far – is too much of a coincidence to be totally explicable in terms of a substratum effect in all cases, and that it is therefore indicative of an earlier merger in England. There is considerable evidence, we would maintain, of there being a merger of /v/ and /w/ in pre-19th-century English in the southeast of England. If we are correct in this, then all the reports that we have cited suggest that it was a merger that was subsequently reversed, and not a near-merger.

##### 5. The two-way transfer pattern

We now move on to another important piece of evidence which we have so far not discussed. This evidence concerns what we can call an *apparent two-way transfer pattern*. That is, there are a number of reports from England which seem to indicate not a merger of /w/ and /v/ as a result of a sound change /v/ > /w/, but rather that two different changes occurred: /w/ > /v/; and /v/ > /w/. The evidence is as follows:

###### 1) Wyld (1956: 292) writes of the interchange of v- and w-:

“This was formerly a London vulgarism, but is now apparently extinct in the Cockney dialect. Personally, I never heard these pronunciations, so well known to the readers of Dickens, Thackeray, and of the earlier numbers of *Punch*. My time for observing such points begins in the late seventies or early eighties of the last [i.e. 19th] century, and I never remember noticing this particular feature in actual genuine speech, though I remember quite well, as a boy, hearing middle-aged people say *weal* for *veal* and *vich* for *which*, jocularly, as though in imitation of some actual type of speech with which they were familiar.”

He then goes on to suppose that the pronunciation was extant until the 1840s or 1850s. Crucially, he also reports documentary evidence, some of it as early as the 15th century, of a two-way transfer pattern, with examples of the same writer using *v* for *w* and *w* for *v*, and cites instances such as *vyne* ‘wine’, and *vyves* ‘wives’, as well as *wyce* ‘vice’ and *woyce* ‘voice’, suggesting a complex interchange of the two phonemes. This early date is supported by Wakelin (1972: 96), who writes “this change goes back to ME and is evidenced in place-name spellings from much of southern England from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards”. Wyld also argues (1956: 180) that the merger was “probably not confined to London”.

###### 2) Wyld also cites (1956: 179) the Scot James Elphinston, born 1721, as referring to the two-way transfer. And he tells us (1956: 182) that the elocutionist John Walker, born in London in 1732, discussed the V-W merger as occurring “among the inhabitants of London, and those not only of the lowest order” and

as operating in both directions: *vind* = ‘wind’ and *weal* = ‘veal’. Similarly, Thomas Sheridan (1719-88) discusses *veal* > *weal* as well as *winter* > *vinter*:

- 3) This two-way transfer is also reflected, as Wyld mentions, in the stereotypical 19th century Cockney portrayed, famously, in the speech of Dickens’ character Sam Weller in *Pickwick Papers*. Dickens writes, for example, <wery> for *very*, but also <vith> for *with*:

I had a reg’lar new fit o’ clothes that mornin’, gen’l’men of the jury, said Sam, and that was a *wery* partickler and uncommon circumstance *vith* me in those days.....If they wos a pair o’ patent double million magnifyin’ gas microscopes of hextra power, p’raps I might be able to see through a flight o’ stairs and a deal door; but bein’ only eyes, you see, my *wision*’s limited (Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), chapter 34, emphasis added).

- 4) W. Matthews, in his book *Cockney Past and Present*, also cites the v-w interchange as being typical of older Cockney (1972: 180-1).
- 5) The SED gives a few examples of w > v as well as the examples of v > w already cited. Wakelin (1972: 96) cites *watch* from Somerset and *wife* from Kent with initial [v].
- 6) Wells (1982: 568) refers to the “V-W Confusion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London Cockney”.
- 7) There is also evidence from the lesser-known overseas varieties of English. Holm claims for the Bahamas that “[w] and [v] “alternate freely” (1980: 56).
- 8) Washabaugh (1983) claims that in the Caymans Islands, a location we have not previously mentioned, “/v/ and /w/ are sometimes used in the reverse of their English reflexes, e.g., *vejiz* (wages) and *inwestigeyt* (investigate)” (1983: 178). Kohlman (n.d.) agrees: “v and w, which in many words can scarcely be differentiated, and in other words are interchanged. Hence we find ‘vessel’ is ‘wessel’, ‘virgin’ is ‘wirgin’, and ‘wood’ is ‘vood’(p. 13)”.

A two-way transfer /v/ > /w/ and /w/ > /v/ is a very mysterious change from a historical linguistic point of view. It is a phenomenon which most historical phonologists would consider extremely unlikely if not totally impossible. Two simultaneous changes /w/ > /v/ and /v/ > /w/ must surely be out of the question. So why does Dickens show both v for w and w for v? And why do we find so many other reports suggesting the same thing?

## 6. Explanations

We can conceive of three different possible explanations:

- 1) There was a near-merger involving a distinction which Dickens did not hear, and which led the writers cited by Wyld to employ interchangeable spellings. We cite evidence below for why we do not believe this is what happened.

- 2) A single change /v/ > /w/ did genuinely take place. Occasional forms such as *vyves* are the result of spasmodic hypercorrection leading to non-systematic substitutions in the opposite direction /w/ > /v/ also. This point of view is supported by Wakelin: “it may be assumed from the statements of various writers that early New English spellings of *v* for etymological *w* reveal hypercorrect pronunciations”. However, forms such as *vyves* are in Dickens *not* occasional. The consistency with which Dickens converts /v/ to <w> and /w/ to <v> suggests something much more regular and widespread than hypercorrection. Wyld, too, gives numerous examples of substitutions in both directions.
- 3) A complete merger did indeed take place but that *it was on some articulation intermediate between [w] and [v]*. It is a principle of phonological perception that listeners notice what is different about accents other than their own, not what is the same. Listeners also normally perceive segments which are alien to their own variety in terms of segments which are native to it. This would have led Dickens, who presumably did not have the merger in his own accent, and who was presumably doing his best to report what he *thought* he heard, to illustrate Weller as speaking in this highly improbable manner. Dickens would have heard this intermediate articulation in *very* as ‘not [v] and therefore necessarily [w]’ and in *with* as ‘not [w] and therefore necessarily [v]’.

The question then is: if there was an intermediate articulation, what was it? An obvious candidate for an articulation intermediate between [v] and [w] is [β], which combines the bilabial place of articulation of [w] with the voiced fricative manner of articulation of [v]. This possibility occurred to Wakelin, who speculates that the merger in England “may have taken place via a bilabial stage /β/” (1972: 96). For the lesser-known Englishes which we are hoping to derive insights from, Wells (1982: 568) says of the Caribbean that a bilabial fricative ‘has been reported’. The concrete reports of which we are aware are the following:

- 1) Ayres (1933: 10) says that in Bermuda there is “an intermediate sound like Middle German “w” – it is usually a frictional labial sound”.
- 2) Kohlman (n.d.) writes for the Caymans Islands of “a soft blurring that is neither ‘v’ nor ‘w’”.
- 3) For the Bahamas, Shilling (1980) writes that “all white speakers ... used [β] variably with “correct” v and w”. Wells, however, disputes this finding: The essence of the admittedly frequent V-W Confusion is not ... the use of [β] indifferently for both /v/ and /w/.
- 4) Turner (1949: 25) states that the pronunciation corresponding to both English /v/ and /w/ in Gullah – another variety we have not cited before – is /β/. McDavid and McDavid (1951: 28) also tell us that “many white folk informants in and near Gullah country replace both /v, w/ by one bilabial voiced spirant /β/”.

Here again, there are problems of substratum effect as opposed to inheritance from England. The Cayman Islands, for example, are a British colony of three major islands in the Caribbean, about 290 km northwest of Jamaica. The population is about 25,000. About a quarter of the Caymanians are European, mostly of British origin; about one quarter are descendants of African slaves; and the remainder are of mixed ancestry. The Islands were not claimed by any nation until they were ceded to England in 1670. Most of the early settlers were British mariners, buccaneers, shipwrecked passengers, plus land-grant holders from Jamaica, and African slaves. An African substratum therefore has to be considered for the /v/-/w/ merger. The Gullah /β/ pronunciation is also the basis for the claim, mentioned above, made by Holm (1980) for an African substratum effect in the Bahamas. He notes (1980: 56) that Turner points out “that /β/ occurs in many West African languages”.

At least one West African language, however, as we have already noted, has /w/, /v/ and /β/. To complicate matters further, Ladefoged also states that “the I.P.A. does not provide for the symbolisation of the contrast between a labial velar approximant like the English **w**, and a similar sound with closer articulation which may produce audible friction” (1968: 25) which also occurs in some West African languages.

We show here that there is reason to believe that these speculations and reports about an intermediate pronunciation are on the right lines, and indeed for Gullah at least we have no reason to suppose that the report is anything other than phonetically totally correct. We suggest, however, that, while the Dickensian representations and the other reports of a two-way substitution in England can indeed be explained in terms of the merger being on an articulation intermediate between [v] and [w], and while we argue that these constitute evidence to suggest that the reports of a total merger in England were indeed entirely correct, the articulation in question in southeastern England may not have been – or may not only have been – [β].

This assertion is based again on data from Lesser-Known Englishes. In this case, however, it is based on our own analyses rather than second-hand reports. These are phonetic and phonological analysis carried out by Trudgill of six different lesser-known varieties of English, three of which we have already discussed, which all still have a genuine merger of historical /w/ and /v/ on precisely the same articulation. This articulation, however, is not a voiced bilabial fricative but rather a *bilabial approximant*. That is, it is an articulation which bears the same relationship to [β] as [ɹ] does to [z], and [j] to [ɟ], and [ɥ] to [ʁ]. There is no single IPA alphabet symbol for this consonant so, just as one has to write [Ǿ] if one wants to distinguish the Danish dental approximate from the English [ð], so one has to use here – in order to distinguish it from [β] – the symbol [β̥]. Laver (1994: 302) writes:

Apart from the symbols specified above, all other central approximants can be transcribed by adding a subscript diacritic [̥] to the corresponding fricative symbol, meaning ‘more open stricture’. The articulation involves no audible friction, no lip rounding (except before rounded vowels), and there is no approximation of the tongue towards the velum as there is for [w].

The six varieties are that we have analysed are:

- 1) Pitcairnese English, as investigated by Källgård (1993), who very kindly made his tape-recordings, made on Pitcairn in 1980, available to us. Our analyses imply that the transcriptions of Ross and Moverly are incorrect. Pitcairnese speakers consistently use [β].
- 2) Tristan da Cunha, as investigated by Schreier (in press), where at least some speakers have this articulation. That is, the analyses and transcriptions of Zettersten are not totally correct.
- 3) St Helena, as reported in Schreier et al. (2003), and based on recordings kindly made available to us by Karen Lavarello.
- 4) The English of the White community on Bequia, in the Caribbean Grenadines, as investigated by Williams (1987). Bequia, the largest and northernmost of the Vincentian Grenadines, is situated in the Windward Antilles approximately 14 kilometres from St Vincent. Bequia has an area of 18 square kilometres and a population of around 7,200. Little has been written about the settlement history of Bequia and virtually nothing has appeared on the history of white settlement (however cf. Williams 1987). There are two separate white communities on Bequia: Sugar Hill and Mt. Pleasant. Some of the whites in these two communities derive from relocation schemes entered into by the governments of Barbados and St Vincent beginning in the 1850s and lasting up until 1880. Like most other white communities in the Caribbean, white Bequerians have tended to remain in isolation and adhere to rules of colour endogamy.
- 5) The English of the White community on Saba, in the Dutch Antilles, as investigated by Williams (1985, 1987). Saba is the smallest of the Windward Netherlands Antilles, having a total land area of less than 13 square kilometres. The population of Saba is approximately 1,600 although about 400 of these are foreign medical students. Even though Saba has been a colonial possession of the Netherlands intermittently since the mid-seventeenth century, varieties of English have been stable vernaculars of communication among local Sabans throughout the recorded history of the island (cf. Hartog 1988, Johnson 1989, Williams 1985, 1987, in press). Saba has the highest ratio of whites to blacks of any of the English-speaking West Indies. The earliest white settlement on Saba was at the historic village of Mary's Point that was relocated by the Dutch government in 1933 (cf. Williams in press). Presently, the largest white populations are to be found in the villages of Upper Hell's Gate, Lower Hell's Gate, and Windwardside. All of these communities are descended from early English-speaking settlers who came from St Kitts – many of these Presbyterian Scots – and also Barbados – many of these escaped, or freed indentured servants – during the middle of the seventeenth century. The whites of Saba have maintained separateness from the blacks on the island, with most blacks taking up residence in the village of The Bottom following emancipation in 1863 (Johnson 1989: 10).

- 6) Particularly valuable has been recent fieldwork on the basilectal English of the white community on Anguilla by Williams and Trudgill. Anguilla is a British dependency in the northern Leeward Antilles, approximately 235 kilometres east of Puerto Rico. The most recent population census of Anguilla lists nearly 12,000 inhabitants. The majority of the islanders are classified as either black or brown (mixed), with only a handful of ‘clear-skinned’ (white) people. The white population of Anguilla, presently concentrated in the community of Island Harbour, had two likely historical sources. One was the settlement of English from St Kitts who began arriving on Anguilla around 1650 to collect salt and grow tobacco (Burns 1954: 350). Some of these early settlers founded the historical village of Sandy Hill whose only remaining feature is a cemetery. The other source of the present-day white population of Anguilla was the shipwreck of the English brigantine “Antelope” that was wrecked off the small island called Scrub Island, only a few kilometres northeast of Island Harbour village, in 1771. The ship was sailing from Grenada to England when it ran onto the reef. A trio of brothers and their wives, the Websters, survived the wreck and made their way to the main island of Anguilla and established the community of Island Harbour. Although the white population of Anguilla has had contact with the black and mixed populations of the island, a pattern of colour endogamy has prevailed up until recently.

This recent fieldwork of ours has revealed the same pronunciation, [β], but there is the added bonus that, since this phonetic detail was now one of the objects of our research, it was possible for us to witness, as well as just hear from tapes, that no lip-rounding occurs in the pronunciation of the (identical) consonants of *will* and *village*, except before the two rounded vowels /u:/ and /u/. (Laver (1994: 297-8) describes [w] as a voiced labial velar approximant which has a “rounded lip position”.) To cite just one of our informants: Mr Elbert Webster, born 1919, of Island Harbour, Anguilla, employs this articulation throughout in items such as: *away*, *well*, *Webster*, *where*, *visit*, *vex*, *voice*, *everyone*, *television*, *over*, *love*.

Our observations are also supported by Wolfram and Thomas (2002) who report on an isolated area of coastal North Carolina, another location we have so far not mentioned – in work we were not aware of until we had completed our research in Anguilla – saying that “one of the noteworthy patterns apparently found in earlier Pamlico Sound English is the merger of /v/ and /w/..... The LAMSAS Hyde County interview with the speaker born in 1858 indicates a number of instances where [β] is transcribed for both /v/ and /w/.” This feature is no longer found in the area.

It is of course vital that we should state unequivocally that we are entirely confident that we are not hearing a near-merger here. We have had to consider this possibility not only because of Labov’s very persuasive work but also because Kohlman’s (n.d.) description of colloquial Caymanian English contains the phrase “the ‘v’s’ in such words as ‘invited’, ‘several’, ‘have’, and the ‘w’s’ in ‘worship’, ‘work’, and ‘wife’, are pronounced the same, *or almost the same*” [our emphasis]. The consonants involved in the speech of our Anguillian informants are visibly and audibly identical as between the two lexical sets.

An African substratum is less likely as a source for this pronunciation in the speech of white than black Caribbean speakers, though we concede that it is possible. (According to Ladefoged (1968: 25) there are complex relationships between several different labial fricatives and approximants in many West African languages, with some languages lacking both /v/ and /w/ but having instead a voiced bilabial or labiodental approximant). We also have to consider the possibility of an Irish Gaelic substratum. Many of the servants who were transported to the Caribbean from Ireland in the 17th century were speakers of Irish, and Irish lacks /w/ (cf. O Dochartaigh 1984: 298).

However, especially bearing in mind our observations on Tristan, St Helena and Pitcairn English, it is particularly crucial to note that this bilabial approximant articulation is one which is extraordinarily rare in the languages of the world: Maddieson (1984: 96) shows that only 1.9% of his sample languages have this consonant. This rarity strongly supports our proposal that the best way in which we can explain the coincidence of the presence of such an unusual articulation in the six varieties we have analysed is by supposing that all or most of them inherited it from England.

We therefore conclude that these different communities, scattered as they are in different widely separated parts of the world, and sharing an unusual articulation found in only a very small percentage of the world's languages, inherited this articulation from a common source, namely the dialectal English of the southeast of England.

#### 7. The role of dialect contact in restoration

It looks, then, as if there were two different types of merger in southern England. In one, the merger was on [w] and [v] as allophones of a single phoneme. In the other, there was a merger of historical /w/ and /v/ on [β] or [β] or both. How do we account for this rather puzzling situation?

Given that there is reason to believe that there was a merger in the south of England, we have to conclude that there was also a genuine reversal of the merger. And we therefore have to turn, as an explanation for the undoing of this merger, to the dialect contact hypothesis. There is indeed, happily, evidence that dialect contact is exactly the correct explanation of how the W-V confusion was 'repaired'. Reports that we mentioned above from some of the Lesser Known Englishes, other than the seven varieties we have just mentioned, show evidence of a partial reversal in progress. We interpret this as evidence that the merger did occur but is currently in the process of being reversed. This process has only just begun in Montserrat, for instance, where Wells (1982: 568) says that the merger "is restricted to the speech of the older uneducated population, and even for them lexically restricted, since *vote* has [v], not [w]". For Norfolk Island, Flint (1964: 196ff.) reports, as we have seen, [w] in *valley* and *invitation*; he also, however, reports [v] in *devil* (1964: 208), implying that the merger – which we can suppose from the evidence of Pitcairnese was formerly total – has been reversed and that the /w/ for /v/ pronunciation has become very lexically restricted. Even more importantly, our younger Anguillian informants lack the merger also: what is happening in Anguilla now, we would argue, is what started happening in the southeast of England 150 years ago.

We therefore suppose the following. There was indeed an early genuine merger in southeastern England of /v/ and /w/ on [β] or [β̥]. This merger on an articulation intermediate between [v] and [w] led listeners who did not have it to report, and in the case of Dickens, to portray /v/ for /w/ and vice versa. This merger was carried, perhaps in the 17th century, to other parts of the world, mainly the early colonies such as those of the Caribbean, in some of which it still remains. In southeastern England, on the other hand it was reversed, as a result of contact with middle-class accents and accents from further north and west in England which did not have the merger.

Again there is evidence from lesser-known Englishes as to how this took place: what happened in the south of England is probably what – we can infer from Wells' observations – is beginning to happen in Montserrat. There the contact-induced de-merger process has not yet led to a total re-establishment of two separate lexical sets but it has led to the replacement of the low status form [β] by the acrolectal [w] and [v] articulations, which however continue for the moment to be widely used in members of the “wrong” lexical sets. We can suppose that in England, too, the merger was reversed by means of an intermediate stage in which the mainstream English forms [w] and [v] were used instead of [β] but, for a while, allophonically rather than contrastively. This later, chronologically intermediate system is the one which is illustrated in the SED records and the subject of the Norfolk ‘folk memory’, and the one which was also exported, probably in the 18th century, to later colonial Englishes, such as that of the Bonin Islands.

As we said above, we are not at all here opposing the near-merger hypothesis as such. We believe that the evidence put forward by Labov is utterly persuasive, and indeed one of us has produced evidence of one case of a near-merger in his own work (Trudgill 1974). Our conclusion, however, is that, while the near-merger thesis may be valid in many cases, it is probable that in this particular case, and therefore perhaps in others also, this is not the correct historical analysis. The consonants /v/ and /w/ were genuinely merged on [β] and then unmerged again in parts of southern England, via an intermediate stage in which [w] and [v] were allophones of the same phoneme. This merger does not survive in any of the major varieties of English around the world. But it has survived, due to isolation from the influence of mainstream varieties which did not have the merger, as well as to small community size and consequent slow rate of linguistic change, in a large number of lesser-known Englishes. Evidence from these little-studied varieties suggests rather strongly that “once a merger” is not necessarily always “always a merger”.

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