

Representation of phonological changes in GOAT and /r/ in 19th century grammar writing

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This paper is part of an ongoing research project that investigates the representation of changes in pronunciation in the *Collection of Nineteenth Century Grammars* (CNG), which is a compilation of 258 grammars published in 19th century Britain and the US (cf. Anderwald 2016). My overall aim is to gather evidence that aids us in the reconstruction of English phonology. The 19th century is of particular interest for this enterprise as it has often been ignored in historical phonology (Beal 2004: 124-5) and as it saw an astonishing increase in grammars published (cf. Görlach 1998). Moreover, it marks the advent of phonetics as a discipline and saw the emergence of the supra-regional prestige variety RP (cf. Ellis 1869: 23).

In this paper, I will present my preliminary results and show what grammars proposed as variants for two features, viz. GOAT diphthongisation and /r/, and discuss what these reveal about the language of the century. As regards the first feature, Beal (2004: 138) remarks that for BrE, “the first tentative description of a diphthongal pronunciation comes from the turn of the nineteenth century.” However, according to Jones (2006: 303), evidence suggests “diphthongal forms were only firmly established in prestige speech by the middle of the nineteenth century at the earliest.” I will demonstrate that throughout the 19th century GOAT words were presented as one of the prime examples of what grammarians called “improper” or “impure” diphthongs and that in their opinion this vowel clearly belonged to the monophthong system of English. Nonetheless, I will illustrate that there were some grammarians who did discuss either both monophthongal and diphthongal variants or provided clear diphthongal descriptions. Concerning the second feature under scrutiny, i.e. /r/, there is evidence that post-vocalic /r/ deletion must have been variable in Britain until the 1870s (cf. Lass 1999: 115; Trudgill & Gordon 2006: 242). My data indicate that throughout the century British as well as US grammars continued to propose what could be considered a trill-approximant distribution, with the former occurring in initial and the latter in final position. However, I will show that grammarians also discussed post-vocalic /r/ loss and that they displayed neutral as well as negative attitudes towards the feature.

References

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