

Middlesbrough, the world's first railway town, developed from a handful of small houses in 1830 to become the largest new town in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century with a population of 91,000 recorded in the 1901 census. The population continued to increase with the developing steel and chemical industries until the 1960s. Documentable patterns of migration indicate that the rapidly expanding urban centre was a locus of dialect mixing. Such a 'melting pot' situation led to the development of a new contact variety of English.

From the 1870's onwards, Irish-born economic migrants accounted for one in five inhabitants in Middlesbrough, making the relative size of the Irish-born population second only to that of Liverpool in nineteenth century Britain. The influence of this influx of Irish migrants during the nineteenth century may be reflected in perceived similarities between the varieties of Liverpool and Middlesbrough English which were highlighted in a recent perceptual dialectology experiment (Kerswill & Williams 2000).

The present paper utilises three data sets to investigate to what extent we can – or cannot - attribute features of Middlesbrough English to the influence of Irish-English: first, a found data set consisting of approximately 200 interviews on the subject of life and times in Middlesbrough, undertaken by the Manpower Services Commission in the 1970s; second, a collected data set from a socially stratified sample of speakers from Middlesbrough which elicits conversational samples of speech and information on lexical variation and language attitudes (Llamas 2001); and third, a collected data set of controlled speech from informants from Middlesbrough and Dublin, in which specific linguistic features of interest are produced in carrier phrases (Jones and Llamas 2004).

Specific linguistic features such as the use of the svarabhakti vowel in *film* and *umbrella*, the pronunciation of *aitch* as *haitch* and the use of lexical items such as *crack* are popularly attributed to Irish influence. At the discourse level, common perceptions about an Irish heritage are found in the data sets and it is clear that the Irish population had an effect on the popular construction of an emergent community identity.

Differences found in recent preliminary phonetic analysis of patterns of assimilation in Dublin and Middlesbrough English, however, indicate the need for caution in making a link between auditory impressions of similarity (including folk perceptions) and circumstantial historical evidence (Jones and Llamas 2004). This brings into question the extent to which historical contact can be reliably identified as an influence in this particular case, or whether the 'melting pot' situation of the emergent new town of Middlesbrough is a factor in obscuring variant origins.