Becoming local: exploring adolescents’ sociolinguistic limits and potential
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Introduction
Since 2004, Britain has witnessed the “largest single wave of in-migration that the British Isles have ever experienced” (Salt and Millar 2006: 335). Polish workers and their families accounted for 64.4% of immigration from the “new” (A8) EU nations to the UK in 2004. We report initial findings from a research project investigating the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation in English by adolescent Polish immigrants living in Edinburgh. We question to what extent Polish adolescent immigrants are acquiring the variable grammar of their local peer group. To do this, we examine the speech of some Polish adolescents living in Edinburgh and compare their use of the (ing) variable with that of Edinburgh-born adolescents. Our findings suggest that Polish adolescent migrants are acquiring both ‘local’ Edinburgh constraints on (ing) variation and ‘supra-local’ constraints found to operate on (ing) in other varieties of British English and American English. We exemplify this with the pattern of grammaticality constraints operating on (ing) for these teenagers.

Methods
Data collection
Fieldwork on this project took place at a high school in Edinburgh. Linguistic production data were collected from 16 Polish migrants living in Edinburgh. Linguistic data were also collected from 16 Edinburgh-born teenagers attending the same school as the Polish adolescents to provide a benchmark for the types of ‘Edinburgh English’ to which these Polish adolescents are regularly exposed. Sociolinguistic interviews were carried out between all participants and the third named author, a female researcher from Edinburgh. Speakers were also recorded performing a short reading task of 17 sentences that was designed to elicit a wide range of different phonological variables. The conversation and reading-task data were transcribed orthographically using ELAN (http://www.lat-mpi.eu/tools/elan/), resulting in a time-aligned corpus of around 100,000 words.

Analysis
As a first step in our analysis, we explored the variable realisation of (ing) (with variation between [Iv] and [IN] in unstressed syllables) in this corpus. We extracted all tokens of (ing) from the conversation and reading passage data (1388 tokens) and coded these data for a range of different social and linguistic constraints often found to operate on (ing) variation in English2. We then subjected the data to a multivariate analysis to determine which social and linguistic factors constrain the realisation of (ing) among each of the two speaker groups in Edinburgh.

Results
Our results suggest that certain constraints on (ing) appear to have been adopted wholesale from the local peer group by the Polish adolescents, some have been adopted but do not exactly mirror the local peer-group pattern and some constraints operating on (ing) for the Polish adolescents are entirely different to those found among the local adolescent peer group. However, the most common pattern is of ‘transformation’ of constraints among the L2 learners. The Polish adolescents typically either produce a different version of the native-speakers’ variable grammar by re-ordering the internal hierarchy of existing constraints or they adopt new constraints on (ing) which are not apparent in (or not relevant to) the UK-born adolescents3.

An interesting example of this emerges with respect to the treatment of the

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1 We would like to thank the ESRC for funding this research (RES-000-22-3244).
2 Predictor variables included preceding and following phonological context, grammatical category of the lexical item, number of syllables in the word, previous realisation of the (ing) variable, lexical frequency, speech style, sex of speaker and the speakers’ attitude towards the local Edinburgh accent (see Schleef, Clark & Meyerhoff (in prep) for further details).
3 Rbrul (Johnson 2008) was used to run a mixed-effect multiple regression analysis in which the individual speaker was also included as a random effect. Full details of this regression can be found in Schleef, Clark & Meyerhoff (in prep).
4 A detailed discussion of this point can be found in Schleef, Clark & Meyerhoff (in prep).
grammatical category constraint among these two groups of Edinburgh-based speakers. The most consistently demonstrated linguistic constraint on (ing) in English is that it is often subject to a type of grammatical conditioning that Labov labels the ‘nominal-verbal continuum’ (2001: 88). Put simply, verbs favour apical realisation of (ing), nouns favour velar realisations of (ing) and gerunds (which have properties of both nouns and verbs) fall somewhere between these two extremes. For Edinburgh-born adolescents, there is no evidence of a nominal-verbal continuum; among the Edinburgh-born adolescents, however, a very clear pattern emerges with respect to the –thing compounds (something, everything, anything, nothing): –thing compounds which behave as pronouns (e.g. ‘I don’t know anything about it’) favour the velar variant and –thing compounds which behave as discourse particles (e.g. ‘I don’t know about it, or anything’) favour the apical form. Polish adolescents living in Edinburgh seem to have acquired this local constraint. However, (ing) variation among Polish adolescents in Edinburgh also seems to be influenced by a nominal-verbal constraint. This pattern becomes particularly apparent when we chart the log-odds from the regression analysis for each of the speaker groups (see Figures 1 and 2).

Summary and conclusions
Our findings are in line with other research on the sociolinguistics of second language acquisition: Polish adolescents learning English in Edinburgh have acquired only “partial mastery of the constraints on variation observed by L1 speakers” (Uritescu et al. 2004: 354). However, in the case of the grammatical category constraint, this depends
on the definition of ‘L1 speakers’ because Polish adolescents display patterns of variation that are typical of both local L1 speakers in Edinburgh and other L1 speakers of ‘British English’ or ‘American English’. This in itself is an interesting finding and one which requires further investigation. However, we must also bear in mind as we interpret this result that “sociolinguistic competence cannot be understood in terms of a single variable” (Howard et al 2006); a fuller linguistic analysis dealing with variation from different levels of the grammar is necessarily our next step.

References


Meyerhoff, Miriam. 2009. Replication, transfer and calquing: using variation as a tool in the study of language contact. Language Variation and Change 21 (3).

