The accent of John Lennon: an introduction

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1.1 introduction
The twentieth century was a time of many changes as any other century. The great development of transportation, which made the actual movement of people and their languages much easier, and the advent of such media as radio and television, which brought standard accent first, then various other accents, to the areas where those accents were perhaps unfamiliar, made much more language contacts than previous centuries possible.

One of the symbolic figures of that era was the Beatles. This study examines the accent of its leader: John Lennon. This is chiefly a study of stylistic variation in the sense of intra-speaker variation in an age of much geographical and social mobility. His life reflects some of such changes. He once commented in an interview in 1975.

We were the first working class singers that stayed working class and pronounced it … didn’t try and change our accent which in England are looked … were looked down upon, probably still are. … all the stars in England … before, there were a couple of sort of rock ’n’ roll stars before us, but any major star in England had to change his voice. They do it too in America to get on TV and radio. (The Tomorrow Show)
He was born in Liverpool with a self-manifested working class background, and with the success of The Beatles, moved to London in 1963, becoming a celebrity and millionaire. In 1971 he left Britain to live in New York with a Japanese wife, where his life ended in 1980. The recording of his pronunciation abounds and is available, mainly in the forms of songs and interviews.

The investigation of his accent is carried out from the two points of view. The first is a diachronic study. Did his accents change over the years? Did such mobility in region, socio-economic class, and time have any influence on his accent? The second is a synchronic one. Which geographically and socially marked variant, when he had more than one choice, did he use?

1.2. Methodology

John Lennon’s songs and speech (i.e. interviews) are used for the material for analysis. Considering his northern English origin, and movement to the south of England, and then to the United States, the following features are examined in this study. Other features may be added in the following studies. For the description of vowels, the keywords used by Wells (Wells 1982) as well as phonemic transcriptions are employed.

1. **STRUT (/ʌ/)/FOOT (/ʊ/):** accents in the north of England lack the vowel /ʌ/, having /ʊ/ instead, for such words as *love, sun* etc..

2. **NURSE (/ɜː/)/SQUARE (/eə/):** Liverpool accent lacks the opposition between /ɜː/ and /eə/, the most typical realization being [e:] (Trudgill 2005).

3. **LOT (/ɒ/ in RP, /ɑː/ in GA):** some British singers seem to use their native [ɒ] in their speech, but often use American [ɑː] in singing, at
least for some words such as got, not etc..

4. Rhoticity: accents in England are generally non-rhotic, as well as some accents i.e. southern and eastern, in the United States.

5. /t/: in Liverpool accent /t/ may be realized as [ɾ] (tap) between vowels.

Auditory analysis is mainly employed for this study.

2. Songs

2.1 Five features
1. STRUT (/ʌ/) / FOOT (/o/): This feature demonstrated the most mixed results, with [ʌ] and [o] both being used. This point is discussed in more detail below.

2. NURSE (/ɜ:/) / SQUARE (/eə/): generally [ɜ].

3. LOT: [o] and [ʌ:] are both used, [ʌ:] generally limited to some lexical items such as got, not.

4. Rhoticity: generally non-rhotic.
5. /t/: generally [t] (tap), sometimes [t], presumably owing to such factors as linguistic context, the rate of speech, etc.

2.2 STRUT (/ʌ/) and FOOT (/ʊ/) in detail
The examination of STRUT (/ʌ/) /FOOT (/ʊ/) was carried out in more detail as it demonstrated the most mixed results. The following six songs were selected for this task:
The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2.
Five songs out of six with the single exception of ‘Come Together’ had the majority of standard variant [ʌ], with ‘Please Please Me’ and ‘Love’ 100 percent, ‘Starting Over’ approximately 81.8 percent, ‘Imagine’ 70 percent. ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ showed the most mixed results with [ʌ] 62.5 percent and [ʊ] 37.5 percent. [ʌ] accounts for 65 percent, and [ʊ] 35 percent for all the six songs. The possible factors are discussed in the section 4, with the results of the analysis of the interviews.
Figure 1  Distribution of [ʌ] and [ʊ] in each song
(number in the bar = number of tokens)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please Please Me (1963)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strawberry Fields Forever (1967)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Come Together (1969)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Love (1970)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Imagine (1971)</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting Over (1980)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2  Distribution of [ʌ] and [ʊ] in all the six songs

- [ʊ] 35%
- [ʌ] 65%
3. Interviews

The following five interviews are examined. One or several sections of those interviews are taken for analysis. The approximate number of words contained in those parts is shown after a brief introduction of the interviews.

1. BBC *The Mersey Sound* (1963): The interview of the Beatles is included in a BBC television documentary entitled *The Mersey Sound* (approximately 240 words)

2. Chicago Press Conference (1966): John Lennon answers the questions about his so called 'Jesus statement'. (approximately 380 words)

3. Larry Kane Interview about 'Apple' (1968): American newsman Larry Kane interviews John Lennon and Paul McCartney about their new company 'Apple.' (approximately 125 words).

4. *The Tomorrow Show* (1975): John Lennon talks about a variety of topics in an American TV show called *The Tomorrow Show*. (approximately 200 words)

5. *Playboy* Interview (1980): *Playboy* magazine’s interview (approximately 350 words)

3.1 Five features

As in section 2, the following features are examined. The general results are as follows:

1. STRUT (/ʌ/) / FOOT (/ʊ/) : Again, this item demonstrated the most mixed results, with [ʌ] and [ʊ] both being used. This point is discussed in more detail below.

2. NURSE (/ʌ/) / SQUARE (/eɪ/) : generally [ʌ()].
3. LOT: generally [u].
4. Roticity: generally non-rhotic.
5. /t/: generally [t] (tap), sometimes [t], presumably owing to such factors as linguistic context, the rate of speech, etc..

3.2 STRUT (/ʌ/) and FOOT (/ʊ/) in detail
As in section 2, the examination of STRUT/FOOT vowel was carried out in more detail using the same sections of the interviews. The results are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

The examination of STRUT/FOOT vowel yielded somewhat interesting results. While the interviews given in the 1960s had over 90 percent of [u], with [ʌ] a little over 9 percent, the general pattern is reversed for the interviews conducted in the 1975 and 1980, with [ʌ] having 85 percent and [u] 15 percent. The possible factors are discussed in the section 4, with the results of the analysis of the songs.
Figure 3  Distribution of [ʌ] and [ʊ] in each interview
(number in the bar = number of tokens)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[ʊ]</th>
<th>[ʌ]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mersey Sound (1963)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago (1966)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry Kane Apple (1968)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomorrow Show (1975)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playboy (1980)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4  Distribution of [ʌ] and [ʊ] in all the interviews
(number in the bar = number of tokens)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[ʊ]</th>
<th>[ʌ]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Discussion and concluding remarks

One interesting finding yielded from this study may be the variability of the use of the variants of STRUT (/ʌ/) and FOOT (/ʊ/) vowels. Of all the alternative pronunciations available for John Lennon, it is mainly with this item, and possibly with LOT vowel, that he demonstrated variability worthy of attention. For other items, his pronunciation was fairly consistent.

With regard to speech, i.e. interviews in this case, at least as to the materials analysed here, John Lennon mainly used his native [ʊ] in the 1960s when he lived in Britain, and principally [ʌ] after he moved to the United States. In the studio recorded songs, however, no such clear pattern is discernible and the results are more mixed, with the higher rate, i.e. than in the speech, of the production of [ʌ] throughout his music career. The proportion of [ʌ] in the songs is higher (65%) than in the interviews (approximately 45%).

Possible factors for the difference are as follows. In his speech, which is generally thought to be closer to the pronunciation a person usually uses, John Lennon mainly used [ʊ] in the 1960s when he lived in Britain and probably had many opportunities to be in contact with the northern English accents, and when he was often surrounded by the other members of the Beatles who were also from Liverpool. When he moved to the United States, the encounter with the northern English [ʊ] was perhaps rare, and the majority of the people associated with him probably had [ʌ] for the words he had previously used [ʊ]. And this may have influenced his pronunciation.

As for the songs, when the Beatles recorded early songs such as 'Please Please Me,' they may have felt, consciously or unconsciously, the pressure to produce the standard variant, especially in the recording studio. Some
of their live performances, at least, seem to display different realizations from the studio recorded versions, notably as to the northern English variant [ʊ]. In the later 1960s, they may have felt more relaxed and started to produce their native norm [ʊ]. The songs recorded after John Lennon moved to the United States usually demonstrate more [ʌ]s in accordance with the results of the examination of the interviews. The type of song, for example, ballad or heavy rock’n’roll etc., may be related to the production of the type of the variant.

These results should be, however, best regarded as tentative, owing to the small amount of the data employed for this study. In the following studies, hopefully, more material will be analyzed and more credible conclusions may be attained.
Appendix 1 ‘She Loves You’ and Liverpool accent
One of the Beatles’ earliest songs ‘She Loves You’ (1963) is a co-work of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. The examination of the rhymes in the song reveals the existence of Liverpool accent in the mind of the writers.

You think you lost your love,
Well I saw her yesterday.
It’s you she’s thinking of
And she told me what to say.

......
She said you hurt her so
She almost lost her mind.
And now she says she knows
You’re not the hurting kind.

......
You know it’s up to you,
I think it’s only fair,
Pride can hurt you too,
Apologize to her

As can be seen from the second stanza above, the first and the third line, and the second and the fourth, are meant to rhyme. Therefore, of and love in the first stanza above are meant to be a rhyme, which is obviously not in the southern England standard accent. However, it can be a rhyme in the northern English accent. The next example is more strictlyLiverpudlian. In the third stanza above, fair and her are meant to rhyme, which is not a rhyme even in general northern English accents, not to
mention Southern English accents. However, it can be a rhyme in Liverpool accent. (See NURSE (/3:/)/SQUARE (/eə/) in section 1.2 Methodology)

Appendix 2 'Imagine' and L Vocalization
As I have pointed out in my past study (Sato 2005 etc.) distinguishing a velarised variant from its vocalic counterpart with accuracy is extremely difficult and problematic.

An example of this is found in 'Imagine.' The final consonant /l/ in the phrase 'Imagine all the people', which is repeated three times in the song, sounds vocalized at least for some people. I have tested it in my class over the years, and the majority of the students have been of opinion that it sounds vocalized, though sometimes the opinions have been divided. I myself had been of opinion that it is largely vocalized. However, in the well known promotion film in which John Lennon plays the white piano in his Ascot home, his tongue-tip is clearly visible, between the lips, curling towards the alveolar ridge when he sings this phrase the second time (time: around 2:02 in the film). When I noticed it for the first time, I was bewildered and thought it was a velarized variant after all. On second thought, however, I thought it should be treated with more caution. Firstly, the song may not have been recorded at the same time when the film was shot. It is very likely that the song was recorded in the studio first and the film was shot afterwards. Secondly, the tongue-tip may not have reached the alveolar ridge although it was raised towards it. The tongue-tip, at the crucial point is invisible behind the upper teeth. The phoneme /l/ was clearly in his mind and he apparently aimed it but may have missed the goal. I have listed several possibilities of the relationship
between the tongue-tip contact and the production of the velarized or the vocalized variant in my past study (Sato 2005), and my tentative conclusion is that one can produce the impression of both the velarized and the vocalized variants with or without the tongue-tip contact.

References


Dorling Kindersley

**DVDs**
*Lennon Legend*. EMI. 2003