Anythink or nothink: a lazy variant or an ancient treasure?

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Introduction

I began my education in 1946 at Sydenham school in a poor area of Christchurch. Among my early memories of that school was the teacher's intense disapproval when children pronounced the words *something, nothing, everything* or *anything* with a final devoiced consonant — *somethink, nothink, everythink* and *anythink*. Later when I moved to St Margaret's College, a private girls' school, the *somethink/nothink* variants were no longer heard. From this personal experience I have always associated what I will call the '-*think* variant' as one used by children in lower socio-economic areas, and avoided by the middle class.

Since that time I have heard the -*think* variant from time to time without considering it of much interest or importance. When I have talked to groups of teachers, to community groups and to teachers of Speech Communication, examples of the -*think* variant are sometimes offered as evidence of 'the most disliked speech habits', especially of children. For some it is put in the same category as the disyllabic pronunciations of *grown* and *known* as 'grow-en' and 'know-en', mention of which is accompanied by eyes rolled upwards and visible shudders.

Yet in spite of such open hostility from some, the -*think* variant has not gone away. In one of his Saturday morning National Programme radio sessions on language, Max Cryer responded to a question from a person who wanted to know why people say 'everythink' and 'nothink'.

> There is no 100% authoritative answer to this. I can only advance a personal theory of my own, that New Zealanders are lazy about speaking and will often pronounce a word in a way that is physically easier than the correct way.
>
> This matter is an example — to say 'ing' requires a minuscule muscular pressure at the back of the throat for a nano-second. To say 'ink' does not require the same pressure. So incredibly, there are people who opt for the easier way and who abide by the principle 'it doesn't matter how I sound, they know what I mean.' There is also linguistic osmosis (something New Zealanders are prone to — changing the way they say something immediately they hear another culture pronounce the same word differently.) Cockney speech uses the 'k' in this form, and some New Zealanders adopt this, and even adopt the Cockney 'f' and say 'somefink' — again laziness, it saves going to the trouble of a split-second pressure to say 'th'.

(24/1/98)

Max Cryer's response to the question is very much in line with the explanations given by earlier commentators on New Zealand English pronunciations. Many school teachers were concerned that poor language habits were the result of laziness, of children not making the physical effort to articulate clearly. This view appears constantly in early school inspectors' reports, for example this comment from the Wanganui school inspectors in 1925: "Some faults of pronunciation were observed, and poor enunciation rising out of slothfulness rather than ignorance" (*AJHR* -2 Appendix C: 50).

A similar opinion was expressed a number of times by those giving evidence to the Cohen Commission on Education in 1912:

(Mr L. Cohen in response to Mr Davidson):

I think the degradation of spoken English in the Dominion is not more marked in one province than another, and is due mainly to carelessness, laziness, indistinct utterance and slovenliness.

(*AJHR* 1912 E-: 462)

The notion of 'linguistic osmosis' put forward by Max Cryer, whereby new variants occur through a kind of linguistic contagion, is also a common earlier explanation. At a time when the possibility of international communication was very limited, the influences were more local, coming in particular from 'the home and the street':

...the influence of the teacher must often be pitted against that of the home and the street - influences ever present, and in many cases dominant over others operating in the schoolroom.

(Wellington School Inspectors, 1908 (*AJHR* E-1B: 16))

Mr Cohen also had comments to make on this subject in his submission to the Cohen Commission on Education:

... it is said that the teachers in the schools speak good English, that the good English that they speak is impaired by the baneful influences of home and home life, that the parents do not speak good English, and that that neutralises the influence of the teachers.

(*AJHR* 1912 E-12: 460)

The listener's query and Max Cryer's response alerted me to the *-think* variant. In a week's viewing of television news and interviews I heard four definite instances of it, and some possible instances of it. The four clear instances were all used by young lower class people. Their speech sometimes contained examples of vernacular syntax. The other instances seemed to be assimilative — 'somethink I heard...' and 'I knew nothink about it' etc.[1] More surprisingly, in the same week I came across a written example of the *-think* variant in *The Press*, in Christchurch, in an article describing prisoners

escaping from Addington prison overnight and returning the following morning:

> Schultz returned before dawn and was tucked up in bed before he was checked the next morning, Mr McKenzie said The Corrections Department said yesterday they knew "nothink".

(*The Press* 8/4/98)

The *-think* variant

It is well known that for words ending in *-ing* there are two variants, [ɪŋ] and [ɪn]. As John Wells points out:

> In words such as *running* the form [rʌnɪŋ] is on the whole associated with higher social class and more formal speech, [rʌnɪn ~ rʌnən] with lower class and less formal speech (1982: 262).

Wells also points out that the *-ing* in question is not only the verbal *-ing*, but also the *-ing* on nouns such as *morning, ceiling, shilling* and *pudding*. However words such as *string, fling, redwing* never have [-n]. In other words the alternation is restricted to weak syllables. The study of the (-ING) variable has been the focus of major sociolinguistic research (see especially Trudgill,1974).

However in the case of words like *anything* and *something*, these do not in fact have the (-ING) variable, but rather the (-THING) variable. It is a small select group of four words compounded with *-thing*: *something, anything, everything* and *nothing*. The variables (-ING) and (-THING) are therefore two different morphemes with different but over-lapping variants. It appears that in some English speaking places there is a third variant possible with the (-THING) variable — [ɪŋk] — which does not occur with words containing the (-ING) variable. Thus:

(-ING): [ɪŋ] ~ [ɪn]

(-THING): [ɪŋ] ~ [ɪn] ~ [ɪŋk][2]

(For further discussion on this see Shnukal, 1978: 101-119)

Where is '-think' heard?

One of Max Cryer's explanations for the *-think* variant is that when some New Zealanders hear Cockney speakers using this they copy them. This explanation can not be taken seriously; sociolinguistic research has convincingly shown a number reasons for language change, but this is not one. However it is interesting that Cryer identifies Cockney English as the origin of the variant. In his book *Cockney Past and Present* (1938), William Matthews writes:

> On the other hand, Cockneys more frequently 'drop the g' in *-ing*,
> *takin'*, *runnin'* ...Some Cockneys, however, pronounce this group as
> *-ink*: the pronunciation is pretty general in 'something', 'nothing',
> 'anything' etc. (p.176)

The evidence seems to be strong for its occurrence in the London area.
Geoffrey Nathan (p.c. 1998) wrote, 'I also recall my mother, who was raised
in central London, and occasionally produced some authentic data, used to
say [nʌfɪŋk]'.

Individual responses through the internet have also attested to its
presence in South East England. Max Wheeler (p.c. 1998) writes:

> Where I grew up (Pinner, Middlesex, 1950s) it was very much the
> casual style of school children, perhaps Lower Middle Class given
> the social characteristic of the neighbourhood. I would say it was
> common even among those who did not display the θ/f merger,
> and a fortiori among those who did. But my perception is that it is
> stereotypical of London-influenced pronunciations in S.E. England
> up to the present.

Tony Deverson who grew up in Kent also remembers the *-think* variant from
his childhood (p.c. 1998).

There is a small amount of evidence that it was heard in other parts of
England also. The Survey of English Dialects cites single occurrences of the
-think variant in a number of places in the Midlands, with it being more
common in Leicestershire; it also appears infrequently in the Survey in the
South, being most common in Hampshire.[3] It is interesting, however, that of
the two standard accounts of British dialects, Hughes and Trudgill (1996) do
not mention this variant at all, and Wells' (1982) three volumes work *Accents
of English* has only one passing reference to it as an example of preglottalised
affrication [na-θɪŋʔkx]. If it is indeed a variant which is most likely to occur in
the speech of working class children in certain areas, it is possible that the
academic commentators have just not encountered it. It is also possible that it
is not as common today as it was.

Outside Great Britain, as well as occurring in New Zealand, this variant is
also heard in Australia. Research by Timothy Shopen in Canberra found very
few instances of it in his data which involved 33 females and 47 males in a
total of 166 conversations. Out of 1660 instances of (-ING) only 16
pronunciations were reported as [ɪŋk]. Because so few instances of this
variant were recorded it was decided that no valid judgements could be made
about its social distribution or stylistic value; consequently these tokens were
included with the (-ING) data (Wald & Shopen 1981: 223).

In 1977 Anna Shnukal interviewed 32 informants in Cessnock, about
200kms north-west of Sydney — a predominantly working class and isolated
town where people claimed to speak alike. To 'speak Cessnock' means to
speak badly, to use a 'slack type of speech'... (Shnukal 1978: 201). Her corpus
contained 277 tokens of the *-think* variant out of a possible 466 cases, with

middle class speakers using significantly less of the *-think* variant than the working class speakers. Nevertheless almost all the middle class speakers did use the *-think* variant, and they used it more than the non-standard [-ɪn]-for (-ING). She also found a 'progressive increase in preference for the non-standard [ɪŋk] form as the age of the speaker decreases' (p. 207).

Historical evidence of '-think'

England

In his book *A History of Modern Colloquial English*, written in 1920, H.C. Wyld wrote, 'Among very vulgar speakers — not London alone — we sometimes hear '*nothink*' for *nothing* at the present time' (p.290). He quotes Elphinston (1787) who remarks 'a common Londoner talks of *anny think* else or *anny thing kelse*', and again 'English vulgarity will utter *anny think*.'

A.J. Ellis (1889), writing about London speech, quotes an anonymous book written in 1817 entitled *Errors of Pronunciation and improper expressions used frequently and chiefly by the inhabitants of London*. In an alphabetical list of the 'errors' can be found *any-think*.

Other 19th century sources of the *-think* variant can be found in the works of Dickens and Thackeray. For example in Dickens' *Bleak House*, little Jo the poor London crossing sweeper regularly uses the pronunciation *nothink*, for example:

> 'Are you the boy I've read of in the papers?' she asked behind her veil. 'I don't know,' says Jo, staring moodily at the veil, 'nothink about no papers. I don't know nothink about nothink at all.' (p. 264)

In Thackeray's collection of humorous sketches, *The Yellowplush Papers*, the narrator is a footman who comments on the lives of his employers and their friends in a comic mixture of semi-literate spellings and malapropisms. The variants *nothink* and *anythink* occur frequently.

> No man would have thought there was anythink in such trifling cirkumstance; master did, though, and pounced upon it like a cock on a barleycorn… These kind of prommises were among the few that I knew him to keep: and as I loved boath my skinn and my boans, I carried the noat, and, of cors, said nothink. (pp. 196-7)

Likewise in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Sir Pitt Crawley a baronet, who is described as having 'the coarsest and vulgarest Hampshire accent', says 'nothink'. Becky Sharp comments on this, when she describes Sir Pitt, finding him much more vulgar than she expected a baronet to be: 'He pronounced avenue 'evenue' and nothing 'nothink', so droll...' (p.75).

Dickens wrote *Bleak House* in 1852-3, and Thackeray wrote the *Yellowplush Papers* in 1837-8 and *Vanity Fair* in 1847-8. A.J. Ellis (1889: 228-9) comments on

the language of both Dickens and Thackeray but he does not mention words with the *-think* variant.[4]

Evidence of an even earlier existence of the *-think* variant is given by E.J. Dobson (1957: 942):

> The unvoicing of final [ŋg] to [ŋk] obviously precedes the reduction of [ŋg] to [ŋ], and occurs sporadically in late OE; it is regular in the North-west Midlands in ME and is a widespread vulgarism in ModE. The orthoepists, however give no evidence for it.

On the runic inscription on the Ruthwell cross 'kyning' is written 'kyningc'. This is generally dated 750 AD, which is earlier than Dobson's 'late' OE.[5]

New Zealand

The first serious commentator on New Zealand pronunciation was Samuel McBurney who travelled around Australia and New Zealand in 1887, producing phonetic transcriptions (in glossic) of the pronunciations of a list of words heard in various towns. McBurney's notes were sent to A.J. Ellis, who based his account of Australasian pronunciation in his book directly upon McBurney's work. Included in McBurney's word list chart (in Ellis, 1889: 239-245) was *anything*, for which he gives two variants — *anything* and *anythink*. With regard to the prevalence of the *–think* variant, McBurney used the notation 'f ' to be interpreted as 'few — two or three (less than a quarter).' This applies to Mornington (Victoria), Maryborough (Victoria), Brisbane, Sydney, Wellington, Napier, and Dunedin. The notation 'm' is used for 'Many or more than half.' This applies to Nelson and Christchurch. McBurney's chart suggests that *anythink* was not heard in Auckland and a number of other Australian towns.

In 1911 a reference to the *-think* variant appears in a report written by D.A. Strachan, school inspector from Marlborough:

> ... a child will say 'idear' and think he is saying 'idea' — the defect is one of articulation — or 'somethink' for 'something' — a defect usually of enunciation.
>
> (*AJHR* E-2 Appendix C xxvi)

We have also found an instance of it in the speech of Mr W.J. Wylie born in Oamaru in 1862 who was recorded as part of the Mobile Disc recording archive collected by the NZ National Broadcasting Service in 1947 (see Lewis, 1996).

From these sources we can be reasonably certain that the *-think* variant was heard in the speech of some early New Zealand settlers.

Conclusion

From the evidence presented here, it is clear that the *-think* variant of words like *anything* and *nothing* is not the product of laziness; nor is this a present day attempt to copy a Cockney pronunciation. It seems most likely that this variant was still used in parts of Britain in the early 19th century, and in particular in the London areas. From here it was transported to Australia and New Zealand, where somehow it has managed to survive in the new and often hostile environment. This raises an interesting question. We know that the variant is most commonly reported in the speech of children. Given teacher disapproval and strong stigma, how has it managed to survive? Of course it is not alone, and other non-standard or vernacular forms have also proved amazingly resistant to efforts to eradicate them. Current research into non-standard New Zealand syntax shows that these survive in lower class areas (for e.g., see Heidi Quinn's work, cited in Gordon & Deverson 1998: 142). This supports Lesley Milroy's theory that they are preserved through strong multiplex network ties — as we find in certain New Zealand working class areas, and rural areas such as the West Coast. Perhaps these variants are also kept alive by the wonderfully subversive nature of children's discourse. Variations on the New Zealand national anthem can be heard in primary schools all over New Zealand:

> God of Nations smell my feet...

Or an earlier version: .

> ...You're up there with the sun and the moon.
> We're down here with Piggy Muldoon.

Examples like these, spoken and ephemeral, do not get into anthologies of New Zealand verse, and they are definitely not promoted by teachers in school. We know from the work of Iona and Peter Opie (1959) in Britain, that they can spread like wildfire. We also know that the origins of rhymes heard in New Zealand playgrounds today can sometimes be traced back for many centuries.

Although forms like *anythink* and *nothink* are not in the same category as these rhymes, they do demonstrate the remarkable power of children to preserve and transmit ancient forms in a way which challenges the respectable and the conventional.

The model of personal choice for language use has been around for a very long time, so we cannot blame current political wisdom for the explanation put forward by Max Cryer and others. But it seems to me that such an explanation— the idea that speakers have it entirely in their personal control to use or not use a particular variant — conceals a remarkable linguistic phenomenon. The persistence of variants like *anythink* or *nothink* is evidence that we live in a tightly constructed linguistic community, where social ties, attitudes, and loyalties are all reflected in the way people speak. Saying *anythink* or *nothink* binds children and others to some of those around them, as it might separate them from some others. But it also connects them to countless speakers in the past — maybe as far back as the 8th century — who

used these variants and may have been disapproved of even then. So perhaps we can see *something, anythink* and *nothink* not as bad and lazy, but as ancient treasures, small reminders of the remarkable ability of non-standard variants to survive come what may, and certainly worthy of further investigation.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

[1]Since then I have heard many examples of this variant when talking casually to people. Once attention is focussed on a particular variant it is surprising how frequently it occurs.

[2]Labov et al (1968:121) claim that 'words like *something*, *anything* and *nothing* follow the same pattern as *working* and *fishing*' (cited in Shnukal, 1982). However the research of Shnukal in Canberra (1978) has demonstrated that *anything*, *everything*, *something* and *nothing* are very rarely pronounced with final [n], and have the possibility of [Nk], unlike Labov's example of words like *working* and *fishing*.

[3] Information from the Survey of English Dialects was given to me by Jim Rader.

[4]It is interesting to note that Ellis claims he had not heard the v/w variants used by Sam Weller in *Pickwick Papers*. 'I have not found a certain example in the provinces of (v) being used for (w) and though I have for many years been on the look out for it, have never heard (v) used for (w) *in earnest* in London' (p.229). This suggests that Dickens was portraying speech patterns which were already rare or old-fashioned at the time of his writing. This could possibly also apply to the *-think* variant.

[5]This information was provided by Martin Huld.