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RESEARCH NOTE

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T-tapping in Standard Southern British English: An 'elite' sociolinguistic variant?

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Abstract

Social class is one of the key axes of sociolinguistic variation, but the speech of those at the top of the class spectrum—the elite—is rarely studied. While T-glottalling has spread widely across British English accents, a competing variant—T-tapping—has attracted little scholarly attention in the United Kingdom. This article presents a study of elite speech by examining sociolinguistic variation in T-tapping among adolescent speakers of Standard Southern British English. Data were collected from interviews with teenagers aged 16–19 at two schools in Hampshire, UK. T-tapping is led by those who previously attended private school and is used more by boys than girls in formal speech. The findings suggest that T-tapping may be used to index a combination of authority and informality, which is invoked by elite speakers to assert themselves from a position of privilege while maintaining an image of openness and approachability.

KEYWORDS
elites, social class, social meaning, Standard Southern British English, T-tapping

SAMENVATTING

Sociale klasse is een van de belangrijkste factoren in sociolinguïstische variatie, maar de spraak van degenen aan

de top van het klassenspectrum – de elite – wordt zelden onderzocht. Terwijl T-glottalisatie zich in accenten van het Brits Engels wijdverspreid is, heeft een concurrerende variant – 'T-tapping' (het vervangen van [t] door de alveolaire tap) – in het Verenigd Koninkrijk weinig wetenschappelijke aandacht gekregen. Dit artikel bespreekt een sociolinguïstisch onderzoek naar T-tapping bij adolescente sprekers van Standaard Zuidelijk Brits Engels. De gegevens zijn verzameld aan de hand van interviews met jongeren van 16 tot 19 jaar op twee scholen in Hampshire in het Verenigd Koninkrijk. T-tapping wordt meer gebruikt door leerlingen die vóór hun huidige school op een privéschool hebben gezeten, en in formele registers ook meer door jongens dan door meisjes. De bevindingen suggereren dat T-tapping gebruikt kan worden om een combinatie van autoriteit en informaliteit te indexeren, waarop elitesprekers zich beroepen om zich te doen gelden vanuit een bevoorrechte positie, terwijl zij een imago van openheid en aanspreekbaarheid kunnen behouden.

1 | INTRODUCTION

One of the most robust findings of variationist sociolinguistics is that language use is stratified according to socio-economic class, particularly between ostensibly working-class and middle-class speakers in a community (e.g., Labov, 2001). However, one group of speakers that is often absent from such research is that at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy, referred to here as the elite. Britain (2017) claims that sociolinguistic theorising of elites is inadequate and does not reflect the nature of social stratification in contemporary western (especially British) society. He argues that the field ought to take elites more seriously by dropping some of its old-fashioned assumptions and building on recent work from sociology.

In this article, I respond to this call by presenting an analysis of T-tapping in the speech of adolescents in the English county of Hampshire. T-tapping refers to the use of the alveolar tap [ɾ] as a realisation of /t/. The feature has not attracted considerable attention in existing work on accents of British English, but some studies suggest that in Standard Southern British English (SSBE), taps are produced to avoid the negative or working-class connotations of their much-studied competitor, the glottal stop [ʔ] (e.g., Badia Barrera, 2015). The community under investigation matches the description of elites from recent work in sociology, as it is in a prosperous part of South East England, which contains large clusters of high economic, social and cultural capital (Savage et al., 2015). I use quantitative and qualitative analyses to study how T-tapping varies between groups in the community and how it can be deployed in interaction. This study hence offers an insight into how linguistic variation and social meaning operate among elite speakers and how T-tapping fits into the sociolinguistic picture of variants of /t/ in British English.

2 | SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF ELITES

After several decades of limited scholarly attention on the topic, sociologists have taken a renewed interest in elites, especially in the United Kingdom (Savage, 2015). The traditional image of the British elite is that of the aristocratic upper-class landed gentry. Savage et al. (2015) argue that this is outdated and that at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy in the UK today are an 'ordinary elite' of high-earning senior managers and professionals. Forming around 6% of the population, those belonging to this group are concentrated in London and South East England and have typically graduated from a select group of prestigious universities (Savage et al., 2015). Contrary to common stereotypes of an isolated, insular upper class with exclusively high-brow cultural practices such as attending the opera, today's elites have diverse social networks and are engaged in a wide variety of cultural activities. What distinguishes them from the rest of the population is their much greater economic, social and cultural capital, enabling them to negotiate 21st-century society from a position of privilege. Crucially, Savage et al. (2015) find that elites are able to justify their economic advantage by emphasising the effort and sacrifices made to acquire and/or maintain it, thus framing privilege as a meritocratic achievement. Elite cultural capital, meanwhile, is manifested in being highly confident in the legitimacy of one's interests and opinions, positioning oneself as a discerning arbiter of 'good taste', together with the tendency to enjoy culture with detachment, critique and irony rather than primarily on an experiential or escapist level.

These findings are relevant to variationist sociolinguistics because this discipline, too, has tended to neglect the top end of the social spectrum. Elites are argued to resist phonetically motivated sound changes in order to sound different from the rest of the community, while any changes that they do lead are typically imported from a prestigious non-local variety (Baranowski, 2017; Kroch, 1978). However, fairly little research has specifically been conducted on variation within upper-class or elite speech in the United Kingdom. Exceptions include Fabricius' (2000) and Badia Barrera's (2015) studies of speakers of Received Pronunciation (RP) at private schools, alongside Holmes-Elliott and Levon's (2017) analysis of speakers on the reality television programme *Made in Chelsea*. As a result, Britain (2017) argues that the 'gentry aesthetic' that is gradually being consigned to history in sociology still persists in social dialectology. There is thus a need for work on the speech of 'ordinary elites' so that our understanding of sociolinguistic variation reflects the characteristics of contemporary society and all of the strata therein.

3 | T-TAPPING

T-tapping refers to the replacement of the voiceless alveolar stop [t] with a voiced alveolar tap [ɾ], flap [ɽ] or voiced stop [d].[1] This feature has been well-studied in American English (e.g., de Jong, 2011; Warner & Tucker, 2011), Australian English (e.g., Tollfree, 2001) and New Zealand English (e.g., Hay & Foulkes, 2016; Holmes, 1994), but relatively little work has been dedicated to it in the United Kingdom. Instead, British work has tended to focus heavily on glottal variants of /t/ (T-glottalling; for a recent review, see Smith & Holmes-Elliott, 2018), which are argued to have originated in working-class speech in Glasgow (Macaulay, 1977), London (Wells, 1982) or East Anglia (Trudgill, 1999) and have since spread across the UK and beyond (Eddington & Channer, 2010; Holmes, 1995). T-glottalling is often disparaged in parts of the British press because of its traditional association with urban working-class speakers, yet its stigma seems to be disappearing among upper-middle-class speakers (Badia

Barrera, 2015; Fabricius, 2000) to the point that it can now be used stylistically in RP to index solidarity (Kirkham & Moore, 2016).

While the spread of glottal variants of /t/ has been well-documented in British English, tapped and voiced variants have been largely ignored despite their presence in traditional dialects such as those of South West England (Wells, 1982), Essex (Amos, 2007), Northern England (Broadbent, 2008), Cardiff (Coupland, 1980) and Northern Ireland (Wells, 1982). Some studies have reported tapped /t/ in contemporary accents of the South East, including RP and Cockney (Badia Barrera, 2015; Sivertsen, 1960; Wells, 1982), which Wells (1982) argues may be a result of influence from American English. The phonological distribution of T-tapping in these varieties puts it in competition with T-glottalling, which raises the question of whether these features may be used to make different social meanings.

Sivertsen (1960, p. 119) reports that among working-class Cockney speakers, taps are regarded as 'the normal, "correct" variant', in contrast to glottal stops, which are 'too rough', and alveolar stops, which are 'too posh'. The same associations are echoed 55 years later for speakers at the opposite end of the class spectrum in Badia Barrera's (2015) study of young RP speakers, for whom alveolar taps act as a neutral option vis-à-vis the other two variants. T-tapping's greater acceptability versus T-glottalling is reinforced by Hannisdal (2006), who finds that taps are much more frequent in the broadcast speech of RP-accented TV newsreaders than in typical accent descriptions, particularly among men, while glottal stops are absent. These findings indicate that rather than simply being 'neutral', taps may be favoured in certain situations that require both authority and informality, such as broadcasting. This is supported by evidence that many British pop vocalists take on an 'American' style when singing, which includes T-tapping (Morrissey, 2008; Trudgill, 1983). In popular culture, the speech of self-satisfied middle-aged male SSBE-speaking disc jockeys from the British TV comedies *Harry Enfield's Television Programme* and *I'm Alan Partridge* contains taps that are highlighted for comic effect. Not all of these examples originate from naturally occurring spoken data, yet taken together, they indicate that T-tapping may index a kind of trans-Atlantic sophistication that can be used by (especially male) SSBE speakers to construct their desired personae.

In summary, the social meanings of T-tapping in British English have not been formally studied, yet evidence suggests that taps may act as an alternative variant of /t/ that avoids the working-class stereotypes associated with glottal realisations while potentially sounding more 'informal' or 'cool' than alveolar stops for certain speakers in certain contexts. This stylistic resource may be particularly appealing to elite speakers of SSBE, as suggested by Hannisdal's (2006) and Badia Barrera's (2015) findings. The present study, therefore, investigates the statistical distribution and interactional deployment of T-tapping among speakers of SSBE from high socio-economic backgrounds. The focus on tapping is motivated by its potential elite associations while allowing for its social meanings to be investigated in detail, complementing the extensive body of previous research on T-glottalling. This article does not explicitly look at released alveolar stops, but these are also a potential choice with their own social meaning(s), as shown in various studies in the United States (for a review, see Eckert, 2008). The article hence aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How does T-tapping vary in the speech of young SSBE speakers?
2. How is it used in interaction to make social meaning by speakers from elite backgrounds?

I answer the first research question in Section 4, which presents the quantitative analysis of T-tapping in SSBE. The second research question is addressed in a qualitative analysis of a recorded interview in Section 5. The final section summarises the findings with some suggestions for future research.

TABLE 1 Cross-tabulation of realisations of /t/ by phonological context. SORT OF = word-final pre-vocalic tokens; LITTLE = word-medial tokens preceding a syllabic /l/; PRETTY = word-medial pre-vocalic tokens

	SORT OF		LITTLE		PRETTY	
/t/ realisation	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Alveolar stop [t]	230	10.3	81	47.1	653	80.5
Glottal stop [ʔ]	1728	77.6	70	40.7	98	12.1
Alveolar tap [ɾ]	187	8.4	18	10.5	57	7.0
Unreleased [t̚]	81	3.6	2	1.2	3	0.4
Other	2	0.1	1	0.6	0	0.0
Total	2228	100	172	100	811	100

4 | QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1 | Methodology

4.1.1 | Data collection and auditory analysis

Speech data were recorded as part of a wider project (described in Alderton, 2019) investigating the speech production and perception of young people in Hampshire. The proportion of people in professional and managerial occupations in the county is higher than the national average, and many of its districts show significant concentrations of the 'elite' class in Savage et al. (2015, p. 280).

Forty-five speakers aged 16–19 took part in the study. Twenty-six attended a sixth-form college (state school) while 19 attended a private day school in a neighbouring town. The majority had at least one parent with a professional or managerial occupation. The young people and their parents consented to the former's participation. Speakers were recorded at school in small groups of one to four by the same experimenter, using Zoom H1 and H4N digital recorders and Audio Technica lavalier microphones with 16-bit 44.1 kHz encoding. They completed two tasks: (1) reading the short story *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* (Deterding, 2006), which contains all the phonemes of English, including /t/ in all relevant phonological environments; and (2) discussing life at school and their impressions of auditory stimuli for a perception experiment (not investigated in this article).

Tokens of /t/ produced during both tasks were classified using auditory analysis into the following categories: alveolar stop [t]; glottal stop [ʔ]; alveolar tap [ɾ]; unreleased [t̚]; other.[2] A subset of the tokens amounting to 9% of the total was subsequently re-coded in order to assess intra-rater reliability, yielding 92% agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.85$). The three phonological environments below (with accompanying lexical-set–style mnemonics) were considered in the analysis. Table 1 shows the distribution of /t/ variants within each environment.

- Word-final /t/ preceding a vowel: SORT OF ($n = 2228$)
- Word-medial /t/ preceding a syllabic /l/: LITTLE ($n = 172$)
- Word-medial /t/ preceding a vowel: PRETTY($n = 811$)

Tokens in other environments (e.g., pre-pausal /t/) were coded but were not included in the analysis, as /t/ was very rarely tapped in these contexts. Tokens that appeared in imitated speech or were coded as 'unreleased' or 'other' were also excluded, leaving 3121 tokens of /t/.[3]

TABLE 2 Regression model output ($n = 3121$). A positive β intercept indicates a greater likelihood of an alveolar tap

Fixed effects	β	SE	z	p
(Intercept)	−5.654	0.72	−7.901	< 0.001
Gender = boy	0.456	0.41	1.125	0.261
Previous school = private	1.565	0.52	2.982	0.003
Context = LITTLE	1.490	1.22	1.221	0.222
Context = PRETTY	3.294	0.82	3.998	< 0.001
Word frequency	2.422	0.72	3.352	< 0.001
Task = reading	−0.283	0.50	−0.565	0.572
Gender = boy × Task = reading	1.436	0.58	2.457	0.014
Context = LITTLE × Word frequency	−2.876	1.36	−2.114	0.034
Context = PRETTY × Word frequency	0.866	0.98	0.883	0.377

4.1.2 | Statistical analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted with generalised linear mixed-effects models using the lme4 package in R (Bates et al., 2015; R Core Team, 2017). Tokens coded as alveolar stops and glottal stops were combined to form a 'non-tap' category in contrast to the taps, to facilitate binary logistic regression.

Social categories are complex and intersectional, so not every individual represented by a particular social factor in a model (like gender or class) will share the same experience of the social order as others in that category. However, for quantitative analysis, it is necessary to assume some similarities within groups in order to make generalisations between them. The models included speaker and word as random intercepts and previous school and gender as random slopes by word. Other random slopes were tested but were either a poorer fit to the data or produced convergence errors. The models contained gender, age, current school attended, type of school previously attended (state or private), social class,[4] home settlement type (town or village), discussion group size and task type as social factors. The linguistic factors in the models were phonological environment, word class (content or function), word frequency and number of syllables. Interactions between the variables were included where possible. Fixed effects were removed according to backwards selection if their inclusion did not improve the model fit using the anova() function in R. All the significant variables in the final model were also significant in the full model.

4.2 | Results

Table 2 shows the output for the final generalised linear mixed-effects regression model. A positive β intercept indicates a greater likelihood of tap production.

Figure 1 illustrates the significant interaction between gender and task type ($\beta = 1.436$, $p = 0.014$). Boys are more likely to use taps than girls in both tasks, but the gender difference is much bigger for the reading task than for the conversation task. In other words, the boys' use of taps stays relatively stable in both contexts, but the girls are much less likely to produce T-tapping in the reading task than in the conversation task. This may simply be an artefact of the relatively low token counts for the reading

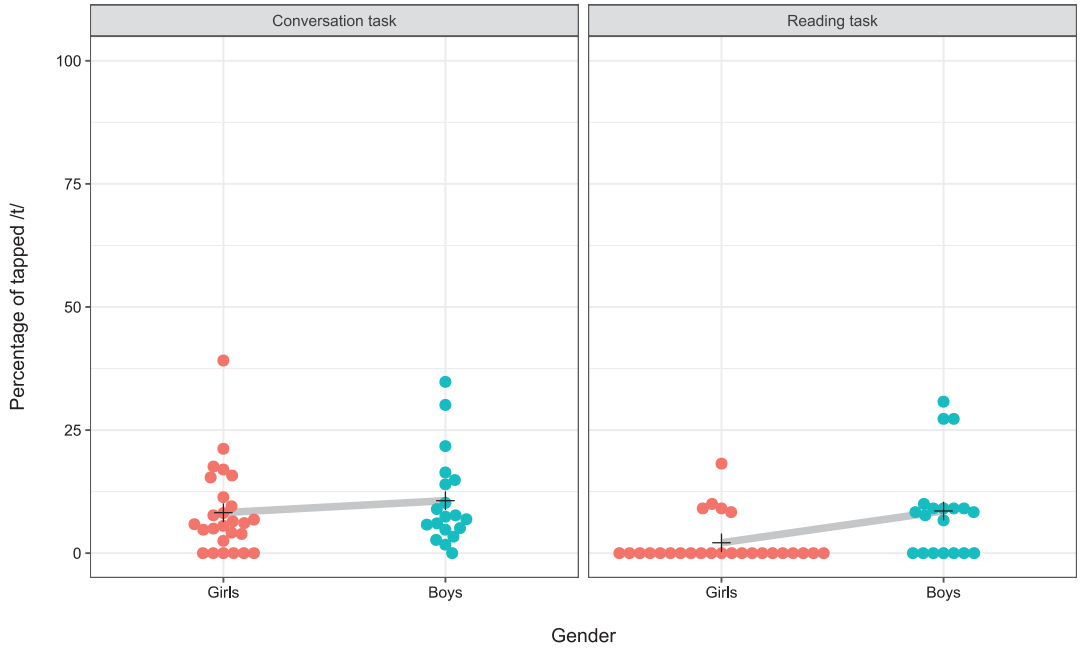

FIGURE 1 Proportion of T-tapping by gender and task type

task, yet it indicates that alveolar taps may be more desirable for male speakers in formal styles than for female speakers, echoing Hannisdal (2006) and the male disc jockey characters discussed in Section 3.

The model also shows that participants who previously attended the private school were significantly more likely to use T-tapping than those who previously attended a state school ($\beta = 1.565$, $p = 0.003$). Figure 2 shows the clear difference in T-tapping as a result of participants' previous school. Taps were used by all speakers who had attended private school, whereas seven participants out of the 28 who had attended state school never produced a tap. The fact that other social factors such as current school and social class are not significant here would imply that taps are not categorically associated with elite status. However, the results reflect Badia Barrera's (2015) findings and complement those of Alderton (2019), where glottal stops are favoured by state-school speakers.

5 | QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

I analyse the qualitative data using Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) 'tactics of intersubjectivity' framework, which employs opposing pairs of identity-framing devices such as 'distinction' (marking someone out as different) and 'adequation' (marking someone out as the same) to interpret how speakers construct and evaluate themselves and others. The data presented here aim to illustrate the potential of T-tapping for social meaning-making rather than being 'representative' of speakers' 'normal' speech (Coupland, 2007).

I focus on the speech of Fred, a 16-year-old boy who attends the private school. His parents are both university-educated and are employed in professional occupations, and the average house price for his postcode is about twice that for the area. Extract 1 shows a conversation that features both substantial T-tapping and T-glottalling. Relevant tokens of /t/ in his speech are highlighted in bold and underlined.

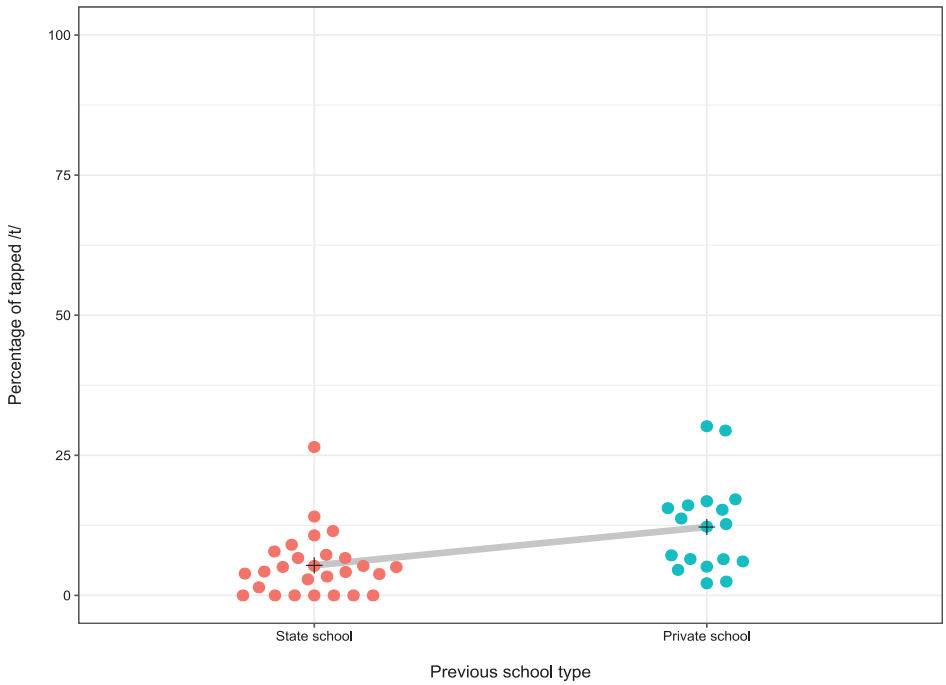

FIGURE 2 Proportion of T-tapping by previous school

Equivalent tokens produced by his friend Hugh, who has a similar social background, are shown in bold but not underlined.

Extract 1

FRED: well I don't know how these people sound but then thinking **abou[ɾ] i[ʔ]** *is* Newtown
MODERATOR: what makes you say that?
HUGH: he just sounds like a Newtown kind of chap you know?
FRED: well Newtown's quite
HUGH: low of intelligence (2)
[stupid people live there]
FRED: [home to a **lo[ɾ]** of] **sor[ɾ]** of middle-class (.) higher-middle-class (.) I mean some of **i[ʔ]** I mean **sor[ʔ]** of course there's always areas which are (.) (posh voice) slightly less (laughs)
HUGH: **no[ʔ]** in Newtown there's **no[ʔ]** (laughs)
FRED: well (.) I dunno (.) they've **go[ʔ]** a free un— (.) they've **go[ʔ]** a free college there so (.) you do **ge[ʔ]** a few
HUGH: oh no no I meant there's not people that aren't peasanty
FRED: (laughs) oh I see (laughs) no no no wait no there are definitely people who aren't peasanty (.) I've got millionaires there's like a big road up
HUGH: I doubt they live in Newtown
FRED: **i[ɾ]** *is* Newtown
HUGH: isn't that Birch?
FRED: no
HUGH: that's Birch that's definitely nice Birch is nice Newtown is **no[ʔ]**

In Extract 1, Fred and Hugh use Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) tactics of intersubjectivity (italicised below) when judging a stimulus voice from a perception experiment, with reference to the nearby town of Newtown and its satellite village of Birch. Both boys employ overt class labels and related stereotypes for the purposes of *highlighting* and *distinction*: for Fred, Newtown is 'home to a lot of, sort of middle-class, higher-middle-class' people, including 'millionaires', while Hugh argues that 'stupid' and 'peasanty' people live there. The offensive neologism 'peasanty' serves to *illegitimate* working-class people, but is intended in an exaggerated, ironic manner. Fred concedes ground to Hugh by *highlighting* the 'free' (i.e., state-sector) sixth-form college in the town, implicitly making a *distinction* between the college and the boys' private school.

Extract 1 is representative of Fred's overall approach to the discussion, which was to position himself as a discerning local expert, deftly describing which types of people lived in which towns and passing judgement on them. However, he always did so in an ironic and humorous manner that reflected his close friendship with Hugh and his self-awareness as a participant in a research study. This stance channels both authority and informality, reflecting the potential meanings of T-tapping discussed in Section 3. In addition, the attitude outlined above is often expressed by the contemporary elite, as it allows speakers to define the boundaries of 'good taste' (Savage et al., 2015) while deflecting any accusations of snobbery with an appeal to irony. This was not the case for most other speakers, who were keen to qualify their comments about others with assurances of their commitment to equality and rejection of snobbery.

In terms of specific tokens of /t/ in Extract 1, it is likely that there is a lexical effect conditioning T-tapping, as the taps appear in a different set of words (e.g., *lot of, sort of*) to the glottal stops (e.g., *got a*, *get a*). Both speakers frequently employ T-glottalling, reflecting previous research on similar speakers (Badia Barrera, 2015; Fabricius, 2000), yet elsewhere Fred explicitly points to glottal /t/ as sounding 'chavvy'[5] and 'uneducated'. This helps motivate the use of T-tapping, but not necessarily as a 'neutral' option, as it is still relatively rare in most phonological contexts (see Table 1). Rather, taps seem to be associated with a kind of informal authority, making them very useful for (male) elites wishing to assert the legitimacy of their opinions while maintaining an approachable and non-snobbish persona.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article addresses the extent to which T-tapping may be conceived of as an 'elite' variant in SSBE via its quantitative group patterns and social meanings in interaction. The results suggest that this feature has connotations of informality and authority, which may derive from its associations with American English and subsequently with its use in popular broadcasting. These indexical meanings reflect the stances often taken by the contemporary elite when discussing social issues (Savage et al., 2015), hence why tapping is led by former private school pupils and by boys in formal contexts. This partly supports existing work suggesting that taps may be used to avoid negative social meanings associated with alveolar stops and glottal stops (Badia Barrera, 2015; Sivertsen, 1960). However, the overall preponderance of T-glottalling in the data indicates that T-tapping is not a reaction against the former but an alternative variant that may be used in certain phonological or lexical environments for the social meaning-making purposes discussed above.

Further study of T-tapping alongside other variants of /t/ in British English would develop our understanding of its social meanings. In particular, perceptual work on T-tapping is yet to be undertaken and would offer a new angle of investigation. It is therefore hoped that this work inspires future variationist sociolinguistic research that dispenses with the 'gentry aesthetic' (Britain, 2017) and focuses on the

language of modern 'ordinary elites' in order to build a clearer picture of sociolinguistic variation at all levels of society.

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NOTES

[1] Ladefoged and Johnson (2015) distinguish between taps and flaps based primarily on place of articulation, but the two terms are regularly used interchangeably. Wells (1982) uses 'T-tapping' and 'T-voicing' to refer to taps/flaps and voiced stops, respectively, but he otherwise treats them as one feature. I use 'T-tapping' as an umbrella term for the phenomenon.

[2] Further information about the auditory analysis, including the phonetic criteria used for coding, is available in Alderton (2019).

[3] I fitted regression models to the data both with and without the unreleased and 'other' tokens and found that their inclusion did not affect the model predictions.

[4] Following previous work (e.g., Labov, 2001), social class is treated as a composite score based on three pieces of information collected from participants: their parents' education levels; their parents' occupations; and the average house price of their postcode. Other methods of operationalising class, such as deprivation indices, were also tested (see Alderton 2019).

[5] *Chavvy* is the adjectival form of the noun *chav*, which refers to a British stereotype of a brash, loutish, working-class youth.

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APPENDIX

Transcription conventions

(.) = short pause (< 1 s)

(1) = pause of 1 s

[Square brackets] = overlapping speech

? = question or statement with rising intonation

(Round brackets) = miscellaneous sounds such as laughter or transcriber's notes

Bold and underlined with [phonetic symbol] = word containing a relevant phonetic feature

Italics = emphasis