Comparative Sociolinguistic Insights in the Evolution of Negation

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The expression of negation with indefinites in English is highly variable (Tottie 1991). It can be expressed on the verb alongside an indefinite *any-* pronoun (1) or can combine with the indefinite to result in a *no-* form, as in (2). Another possibility is (3) in which both the verb and the indefinite carry negative polarity. These variants persist across varieties and result from longitudinal grammatical change and social influences.

> (1)   My parents had*n't any* money.
> (2)   a.   He had *no* money at all.
>   b.   'Cause there was *nothing* like child benefit.
> (3)   We did*n't* know *nothing* about this.

In Old English, the *ne* particle was key to expressing negativity. By the Middle English period, the system had evolved into two possibilities. One favoured a negative indefinite pronoun after the verb and the other involved 'negative concord' (3). The social changes of the Early Modern period led to the middle classes eschewing negative concord and appropriating type (1) (Nevalainen 1998: 275). Since then, there has been competition between all three: the more conservative *no*-negation versus the newer layer in the system, i.e. *any*-negation (Iyieri 2002), as well as the persistence of negative concord, raising the questions: What is the current state of this variability? How does investigating it elucidate whether syntactic variation is socially evaluated? What can this tell us about linguistic change more generally?

Our data comprise substantial vernacular speech corpora from Britain and Canada drawn from sociolinguistic projects (1997-2010). To this inter-variety comparison we also incorporate an investigation capturing differences between large urban and smaller peripheral communities. We extracted negative constructions like (1-3) in corpora from both sides of the Atlantic (Britain N=1204; Canada N=1765), tagging them for grammatical factors previously reported to influence the choice of forms, including the nature of the indefinite, verb type, clause type, and social factors like age, sex and education.

Data exploration, statistical modelling techniques, e.g. lme(4) (Team 2007), and a comparative sociolinguistic approach reveals that *no*-negation is stoutly retained in Britain (75%) but is a minority form in Canada (46%). The linguistic constraints in this system are consistent across varieties: existential *BE* (2b), copula *BE* and main verb *HAVE* retain *no*-negation, as opposed to lexical verbs which favour *any*. An even more intriguing result concerns the social embedding of this variation. Only the British data have age effects. In the North East of England, *no*-negation declines over apparent time, whereas York displays the classic age grading effect. Moreover, in the North East there is a clear sex effect while in Belleville it is education that plays a key role. The unique perspective of access to comparable, socially stratified corpora enables us to disentangle the influence of linguistic versus socio-cultural factors. While the communities share a common variable grammar, the social value in choosing one variant over the other is highly localised.

References

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