

Active retirees: The persistence of obsolescent features
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Sociolinguists have observed that language change follows an S-shaped pattern: new linguistic variants grow slowly at first, then more quickly, followed by very slow change at the end (Weinreich et al. 1968; Chen, 1972; Bailey, 1973; Lass, 1997; Shen, 1997). Following on from this observation, Denison (2004) poses a useful and infrequently-addressed question to scholars of language variation and change: Once a new variant is ratified and adopted by most speakers in most contexts, why should the old variant persist for so long at low rates, or at all? In other words, why should language change look like an S, rather than a J?

In this paper, we investigate one explanation: that some outgoing variants are actually preserved as a result of their rarity. Once a variant becomes infrequent in ordinary discourse, any use becomes marked, and this markedness makes the variant useful as a resource for stylistic and/or identity work (Childs et al 2010, Childs and VanHerk 2010, Dubois and Horvath 1999, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2005). At the same time, speakers may lose awareness or mastery of earlier linguistic constraints on a variant's distribution, replacing them with a simplified, often lexically-driven constraint system.

We illustrate this possibility with four instances of morphosyntactic change in Canadian contexts. We first briefly consider three examples from Canadian French (Poplack & St-Amand 2007, Poplack 1990, Poplack & Turpin 1999). We then move on to a more dramatic instance of such processes at work in Newfoundland English (Van Herk & Childs 2011). There, urbanizing speakers use non-standard verbal s-marking for (ironic) identity performance, while restricting the variant to particular constructions and a handful of lexical items. Some of these changes may actually represent a reversal of earlier constraints, made possible by the new social salience of the variant.

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