

'Senior peer pressure' and late-stage language change

Suzanne Wagner (Michigan State U.) & Gillian Sankoff (U. Pennsylvania)

The incrementation of language change is driven by an adolescent peak in advanced forms of the change (Cedergren 1987, Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2009). Labov (2001a) suggests that this peak is generated via the influence of slightly older peers between late childhood and adolescence. Studies of pre-teens and teenagers (Eckert 2000, 2011) confirm that this period is one of intense pressure to affiliate with peer groups, as executed linguistically through the recruitment of ongoing language changes.

We propose that peer influence among *adults* is also worthy of attention as a mechanism of language change. We present evidence for the possibility of a 'senior peer pressure' effect in an analysis of 91 speakers drawn from the 1971 Sankoff-Cedergren corpus of Montreal French (Sankoff & Cedergren 1972) and its 1984 follow-up (Thibault & Vincent 1990). The distribution of future temporal reference variants (N = 4529) across age, social class, sex, style and linguistic predictors was analyzed using mixed effects logistic regression. The analysis was limited to affirmative clauses, because in negative clauses the inflected future (IF) is virtually categorical (1). Within affirmatives (2), the periphrastic future (PF) is the majority variant, accounting for c. 85% of our data.

(1) Je sais 'ça **sera** pas facile. [#66, 1971, 1070]

'I know [that] that will not be easy.'

(2) On **vaaller** au chalet pour quinze jours. [#4, 1984, 17]

'We'll go to the cottage for two weeks.'

Affirmative IF has become socially marked as the conservative variant. Older, high-status Montrealers are its most frequent users. It most often appears in styles that we coded as 'careful', following Labov's style decision tree (Labov 2001b). Intriguingly, however, this style effect was significant only within our oldest speaker group, comprising men and women aged 50-85 years old. For speakers under 50, IF selection was instead motivated almost entirely by a linguistic constraint: the contingency of the clause.

Linguistic constraints on this morphosyntactic variable may thus appear early, but stylistic constraints appear late (cf. Smith et al 2007). Until mid-to-late adulthood, Montreal Francophones have little passive exposure to formal-style IF and even fewer occasions to produce it. Indeed, in 1971, 16 speakers under age 30 produced no affirmative IF at all. Yet by 1984, it had appeared in the speech of all but two of these same individuals, by then aged 28 - 42. We speculate that middle-aged speakers become increasingly susceptible to peer influence from slightly older adults, who model formal-style IF as a concomitant of senior status. When a language change is at the tail end of its historical trajectory, peer pressure among older adults may serve to maintain remnants of the outgoing variant in the community repertoire. This slows down the disappearance of that variant, possibly arresting the completion of the change indefinitely. Examination of stylistic constraints on variation throughout speaker lifespans is therefore essential to an understanding of both language change incrementation and language change deceleration.

References

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