Language in Society (CL2.203), IIIT Hyderabad

Assignment 4

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1 Introduction

The toy study performed here will be based on one of the linguistic variables studied in the project (which is a study of Indian English syntax and morphology).

The social variable, however, will be distinct.

2 Variables

The social variable under consideration will be *generation*. The speech of Indian English speakers of ages 18-30, those of ages 40-60, and those of ages above 65 will be contrasted.

The linguistic variable to be studied is *question tags*, which are appended to an affirmative sentence to make it into a yes-no (closed) question. The variants of this variable occurring in the data are:

- the standard subject-based tag, *e.g, You're not going home, **are you?***
- the uniform third-person neutral pronoun, *e.g, You're not going home, **is it?***
- a schwa affixed to the end (usually spelled as "uh"), *e.g, You're not going home **uh?***

Note that simple intonation-based questions are not considered.

3 Population and Data Collection

I observed sentences from the spontaneous speech of people around me. The speakers in the range of 40-60 were my parents, my aunt and my uncle; the speaker aged above 65 was my grandmother; the speakers in the 18-30 range were my brother, two of his friends, and two of my cousins.

This study was conducted primarily in North Bangalore.

4 Results

The (estimated) relative frequencies of each variant for each population were as follows.

Age Group	Subject-Based	3rd Person Pronoun	Schwa
18-30	10%	40%	**50%**
40-60	10%	**60%**	30%
≥ 65	0%	**100%**	0%

The maximum-frequency variant for each age group has been marked in bold.

5 Analysis

The results show that among younger people, the schwa is most common, while among middle-aged and elder people, the third-person pronoun is more prevalent (most strongly among the latter). The subject-based tag is not popular in any age group.
A possible explanation for this is as follows.

The oldest generation (my grandmother) does not speak English as a first language. It is probably because of this that the non-standard 3rd person pronoun-based tag is universally used (regardless of subject).

The middle generation has English as a first or second language, but learnt it partially from the oldest generation. Hence the 3rd person pronoun-based tag dominates in their speech, although the standard subject-based tag is also used. Their speech is also influenced by the younger generation's practice of using the schwa, although they do not use it as often.

The youngest age group sticks predominantly to the schwa. This could be due to their upbringing, in which they were exposed to Kannada on a regular basis (in which such questions are formed by adding an open vowel at the end). This method of question-forming is common among Bangalore's younger population.