

Submitting to workshop: Acting on actuation: Why here, why now?

Preferred format: talk

Any seeds can be sown, but which ones will sprout? Exploring selective pressures in the actuation of Swedish gender-neutral *hen*

In order for a language change to occur, there must be an *innovation* (the first use of a new variant) and this innovation must undergo a successful *diffusion* (Croft 2000: 4–5), i.e. propagate through a community. We argue that in order to address the actuation problem and especially to attempt predictions, it is promising to focus not on innovation, but on diffusion, more specifically, on the selective pressures that can affect diffusion (Maslova 2008).

Indeed, if we understand *innovation* as 'any variant that is not currently established in the language and not familiar to the speaker', then speakers probably innovate all the time (creative play or random errors, which are ubiquitous in language, should also be considered innovations under the given definition). Most of these individual innovations have no effect on the language at the community level and disappear without a trace. Only when innovations get diffused and established, can we say that a change has been actuated.

Our point is that it is very difficult, if at all possible possible, to explain and predict all individual innovations, but that it is perhaps not necessary. The selective pressures are more systematic and more predictable, and thus, if we know enough about a given language and a given community, it should be possible to predict which innovations (or at least which kinds of innovations) are more likely to survive and diffuse and which are not.

Berdicevskis (2014) provides emoticons as an example. The language change which can be labelled as "emergence of emoticons" occurred in the 1980s, but as individual innovations, emoticons have actually been attested in 1967, 1969 and 1887. They did not diffuse further at that time, and that they did in the 1980s is probably not a random success, but a consequence of the advent of text-based computer-mediated communication, with its lack of nonverbal cues, limited set of characters and high informality. New technology changed the selective pressures, and as a result, the previously unsuccessful innovation survived.

This view implies that the uniformitarian principle (Labov 1972) has to be abandoned to some extent. The principle assumes that laws and processes that operate in the present are the same that operated in the past, and it is probably not true for the selective forces in language change (Trudgill 2011: 167–169).

There is, however, an important methodological catch. When we are explaining actuation *post hoc*, already knowing which innovations were successful and which were not, it is dangerously easy to fit the explanation to the data. To avoid that, the proposed explanations have to be carefully and systematically tested on various cases to see if they are able to predict the fate of the innovations.

We perform case studies to provide examples of how this visionary approach can be applied. Most prominently, we study the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, which was first proposed in 1966 to replace the traditional *han* 'he' and *hon* 'she', but did not enter the actual usage until the 21st century (Malmgren 2017). We measure relevant social factors (such as indicators of gender equality), track relevant highly visible events (such as, for instance, the first usage of *hen* by a major newspaper or a member of parliament) and the recommendations by prescriptive sources and compare them to changes in actual usage. We test whether the assumption that these extra-linguistic factors change selective pressures which affect the diffusion of *hen* fits well with the data.

References:

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