

Imitation before innovation – A principle of language change

Sverre Stausland Johnsen

Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies

1. Innovation

A new linguistic feature emerges when an individual innovates it. The innovation arises from phonetic factors (coarticulation, misperception) or from mis-/reanalysis of the linguistic input (hyper-/hypocorrection, analogy, overgeneralization).

2. Change

When an innovation is transmitted to other members of the same speech community, it has become an instance of language change (Milroy 1993, Labov 2007).

3. Imitation

An innovation spreads because when people communicate, their speech becomes more alike (Gallois & Giles 2015).

People imitate one another.

4. Diffusion

A linguistic feature can also spread by imitation from one speech community to another – called *diffusion* (Labov 2007).

The paths of diffusion are largely predictable from population sizes and the distance between them (Trudgill 1974).

Linguistic features tend to spread from large cities.

5. Change or diffusion?

When we observe a new linguistic feature in a speech community, is it due to *change* (innovation in the local speech community) or to *diffusion* (imitation across speech communities)?

6. Imitation is stronger than innovation

Communication barriers (geographic, political, social) lead to linguistic barriers.

Within areas of extensive interaction and communication, speech varieties are largely uniform.

This demonstrates that *imitation* is stronger than *innovation*.

If innovation was stronger, we'd expect dialects to split into ever smaller speech communities and idiolects.

7. We have a bias

When linguists observe a new linguistic feature in a language, they typically assume it's the result of a local innovation.

Why? Presumably because it gives them the opportunity to say something about *language* and *grammar* (see section 1).

8. But it's the wrong bias

If imitation is stronger than innovation, a linguistic change is more likely to be the result of diffusion.

Diffusion is best understood by investigating social factors (attitude, networks) and communication (infrastructure, travel), but this is perhaps less interesting to most linguists?

9. A new principle

For any observed language change, it is more likely to have arisen by imitation than by innovation.

Therefore, a linguist should always assume that a new linguistic feature has diffused from another speech community.

10. Conclusion

Many examples of supposed local innovations can be reanalyzed as the result of diffusion from larger cities in their regions (Stausland Johnsen 2012, 2015, 2019).