

Speakers' awareness of a syntactic change in Shetland Scots

The degree to which the historical development of languages is inferred and used by language learners has long been of interest to sociolinguists (Labov 1989). Recently, speakers' perception of changes has even been proposed as a solution to the problem of *incrementation*: being able to detect the direction (and rate) of a change would be fundamental to a mechanism which allows speakers to *advance* language changes systematically across generations (Labov 2001).

While the progression of changes in continuous phonetic variables can be inferred directly from individual tokens, the detection of trends in categorical (particularly morphosyntactic) variables raises additional questions: such a task would require the tracking of individuals' usage distributions over variants, for variables which are much less frequently attested in spontaneous speech than phonetic ones (Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2009; Labov et al. 2015).

In this work we investigate the human capacity for tracking syntactic variables by probing speakers' awareness of three instances of the loss of verb movement in the variety of Scots spoken in Shetland. Adapting the methodology from Trudgill (1972) we devised a questionnaire asking for people's estimates of their own usage of the syntactic variants in question vs. the usage of other speaker groups in their community. This data allows us to extrapolate individual perceptions of differences in apparent time alongside data on speakers' qualitative impressions of the 'age' of the competing variants. Results from 77 speakers show that people are reliably capable of assessing variant age and determining the directionality of the change for syntactic variables that operate well below the level of social indexicality.

References

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