Language and society

SEL1007: The Nature of Language
Dr Jennifer Thorburn
Sociolinguistics

• The scientific study of the relationship(s) between language and society
What do we investigate (on the social side)?

• Social categories (class, age, ethnicity)
• Social groupings (speech communities, social networks, communities of practice)
• Social relationships (style, interaction, performance)
• Different languages within communities (multilingualism, language contact, language shift)
• Attitudes toward language(s)
• Language policy/planning
• ...and more!
What do we investigate (on the linguistic side)?

• A range of (variable-dependent) linguistic constraints, e.g.
  – Preceding/following phonological environment
  – Vowel height, frontness/backness, length
  – Word/syllable position
  – Word type
  – Sentence type
  – Tense/aspect
  – Grammatical gender/number/person
  – Intonational patterns
  – Speech rate
  – ...and more!
“any attempt to answer the fundamental actuation (i.e., why is variation initiated to begin with) and embedding (i.e., how is variation instantiated) riddles of sociolinguistics must consider both external, or social, and internal, or linguistic constraints in tandem”

(Wolfram 1995: 99)
The big issues (Weinreich et al. 1968)

• Constraints:
  – What are the constraints on language change that determine which changes are possible or impossible?

• Transition:
  – How does language change (with a specific focus on the stages that can be observed or posited for said change)?
  – (Covers questions of rapid vs. gradual change)
The big issues (Weinreich et al. 1968)

• Embedding:
  – How is a change related to other linguistic or social changes (i.e. the big picture)?

• Evaluation:
  – What effect does a change have on linguistic structure, on communicative efficiency, and on the social standing of speakers (among other things)?
The big issues (Weinreich et al. 1968)

• Actuation (aka “the very heart of the matter”):
  – “Why do changes in a structural feature take place in a particular language at a given time, but not in other languages with the same feature, or in the same language at other times?” (Weinreich et al. 1968: 102)
  – *Why does a change happen where and when it does?*
How do we look at sociolinguistic variation?

• Variables
  – “a choice between two or more distinct but linguistically equivalent variants” (Watt 2006: 2)

• Type of data
  – Historical | contemporary
  – Speech | writing | CMC | etc.

• Data collection
  – Large-scale sociolinguistic surveys | rapid and anonymous surveys | sociolinguistic interviews | ethnography (participant observation) | experiments (language attitudes, perception)

(TH): $[\theta] \sim [t] \sim [f]$
think ~ tink ~ fink

Past-tense BE:
There was two bears.
There were two bears.
How do we look at sociolinguistic variation?

• Physical location
  – Region(s) | specific space(s)

• Participants
  – Speech community | social network | community of practice

• Timeframe
  – Real-time | apparent-time
Why does this buy us?

Considering social and linguistic factors:

• Complements what we learn through theoretical branches of linguistics like phonology and syntax
• Contextualizes language change
• Explains some of the variation and change we see in natural language data
The social motivation of a sound change

- Martha’s Vineyard, MA
- 69 speakers stratified according to region, age, occupation, ethnicity

- Variables:
  - /ay/, e.g. light, mine
  - /aw/, e.g. loud, pout

http://www.world-guides.com/images/marthas_vineyard/map1_marthas_vineyard.jpg
Martha’s Vineyard (Labov)

• New Englanders tend to say [æy] and [ɐʊ]
• Martha’s Vineyard: [ɔy] and [ɔʊ] or even [əy] and [əʊ]

• Non-salient to residents

• Linguistic constraints:
  – Favoured by following obstruents, esp. voiceless oral Cs
  – Favoured in stressed syllables (opposite of urban trend)
Martha’s Vineyard (Labov)

• Greatest degree of centralization is found in the community of Chilmark
• In Chilmark, middle-aged fishermen have to most centralized /ay/
  – Age-grading

• (Labov 1972: 29) attributes origins of this sound change to Chilmark fishermen
  – Close-knit group
  – Most resistant to “summer people”
Martha’s Vineyard (Labov)

• Centralization is motivated by orientation toward being a native Vineyarder / resistance to outsiders
  – Stronger identification = more central nucleus

• Other ethnic groups
  – Same pattern of sound change visible in speech of Portuguese migrant families (youngest generation) and Native Americans
Martha’s Vineyard (Blake & Josey)

- /ay/ 40 years later in Chilmark
- Real-time trend study
- Drop in /ay/ centralization
- Middle-aged group no longer showing marked linguistic behaviour
- Some linguistic constraints still favour centralization, e.g. following voiceless obstruents
Martha’s Vineyard (Blake & Josey)

• Locals are less affiliated with traditional life due to economic changes
  – Being a local fisherman from Chilmark no longer seems to have the same salient effect on language

• “Labov’s hypothesis that sound changes are socially motivated seems to be borne out.” (Blake & Josey 2003: 482)
(ing)

• “the most uniform of all variables of English” (Labov 2001:86)
• “staple of sociolinguistics” (Hazen 2006: 581)

• Variants:
  – [ɪŋ]  roughly pronounced as  running
  – [ɪn]  runnin’  (prescriptive “G-dropping”)
  – [ɪŋk]  runningk
  – [ən]  runnun
“[N]o modern study has shown a change in progress. Despite its abundant linguistic and social variation, it does not appear to be undergoing diachronic variation currently” (Hazen 2006: 583)

- Relatively stable set of social (=external) and linguistic (=internal) constraints across varieties of English
• Linguistic constraints
  – Grammatical category: progressives and participles > adjectives > gerunds > nouns
  – Regressive assimilation (=priming)
    • Preceding velar favours [ŋ], preceding alveolar favours [n]
  – Progressive dissimilation
    • Following velar favours [ŋ], preceding alveolar favours [n]

• Social constraints
  • [ɪn] associated with informality, lower SES
Intensifiers

• *Very/really/dead/so/super/completely/pretty/etc. cool*

• Typical sociolinguistic correlates
  – teenagers and/or young people (Paradis 2000; Stenström 1999, 2000; Bauer & Bauer 2002; Macaulay 2006)
  – women (Stoffel 1901; Jespersen 1922) – who also lead in the use of new intensifiers (Jespersen 1922; Nevalainen 2008)
  – colloquial usage and nonstandard varieties (Stoffel 1901; Fries 1940)
  – emotional language (Peters 1994; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005)
  – in-group membership (Partington 1993; Peters 1994)
# Intensifiers


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Middle English</th>
<th>Early Modern English</th>
<th>Modern English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12th c.</td>
<td>13th c.</td>
<td>14th c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>swipe:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>well:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>full:</strong></td>
<td>1250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>right:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>very:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>really:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Ito & Tagliamonte 2003: 260)
Intensifiers in Toronto

- Hypotheses (Tagliamonte 2008: 264)
  a) Correlation of intensifiers with particular linguistic contexts can be related with their degree of delexicalization.
  b) Correlation of linguistic patterns with speaker age can mirror the delexicalization process.
  c) Correlation of intensifiers with social factors can be taken to tap in to the social evaluation of the particular intensifier within the community.
Intensifiers

• Delexicalization
  – “the reduction of the independent lexical content of a word, or group of words, so that it comes to fulfil a particular function” (Partington 1993: 183)
  – e.g. very (Mustanoja 1960)
    • adjective meaning ‘genuine/true’ > used in coordinate constructions with a following attributive adjective > intensification
Intensifiers in Toronto

- 36.1% intensified

- *really* = “one of the most frequent markers of intensity in colloquial conversation” in American English (Labov 1985: 44)

- *very* = low rate notable because it is the oldest major intensifier and is thought to be the most completely delexicalized intensifier in contemporary English (Lorenz 2002)

- *so* = incoming variant (but historically used as an intensifier)

### Table 3. Distribution of intensifiers by lexical item (N ≥ 10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexical identity</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>really</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>1282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pretty</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>totally</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completely</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just really</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just so</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extremely</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absolutely</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other intensifier</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø intensification</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>6334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>9905</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Tagliamont 2008: 368)


**Intensifiers in Devon & Toronto**

### Devon English

(Ito & Tagliamonte 2003: 266)

**Table 4. Frequency of intensifiers by lexical item (N ≥ 10).**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexical identity</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td>very</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>364</td>
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<tr>
<td>really</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>287</td>
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<tr>
<td>so</td>
<td>10.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>absolutely</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pretty</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>too</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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<td>that</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>right</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>totally</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>completely</td>
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<td>bloody</td>
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<td>All other items</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>950</td>
</tr>
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### Toronto English

(Tagliamonte 2008: 266)

**Table 3. Distribution of intensifiers by lexical item (N ≥ 10).**

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Intensifiers in Toronto

• Adjective position as a pathway to delexicalization
  – Attributive: Yeah, very very inflated beer prices at some places. (TOR/2j)
  – Predicative: The guys are so different! (TOR/ND)

• Very used with predicative adjectives later in the process so could higher frequency with predicative adjectives or equal distribution across both indicate a later point in an intensifier’s development?
  – Very, really, pretty found in both contexts (varying rates)
  – So virtually restricted to predicative
Intensifiers in Toronto

• Semantic category as pathway to delexicalization
  – Usage rates rise as a new intensifier gets used in more and more contexts (semantic categories)
  – When usage rates drop, they do so across all contexts

  – *Very* is receding but is still used with a broad range of adjectives
  – *Really* expanded in contexts and then increased in frequency
  – *So, pretty* more restricted
Intensifiers in Toronto

Figure 3. Overall distribution of main intensifiers by age

Figure 7a. Distribution of *very* by speaker sex and age

Figure 7b. Distribution of *really* by speaker sex and age

Figure 7c. Distribution of *so* and *pretty* by speaker sex and age
Intensifiers in Toronto

- Intensifiers (*very, really, pretty*) that are more semantically broad and are used in both syntactic contexts = more delexicalized
  - *Very, really* $\rightarrow$ completely delexicalized?

- Intensifiers, once (partially?) delexicalized, can be left underdeveloped in the language or fade away but still remain available to be co-opted back into the active system
Comeau (2011)

• Variety: Newfoundland English

• Variable: verbal -s
  1. Her mom and dad **loves** red wine. (PH R)
  2. They **read** the paper to keep up with it. (PH F)

http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/country/namerica/province/nfzna.gif
Comeau (2011)

- Research site: Petty Harbour
- 28 speakers
  - (But 6 removed because they categorically avoid -s)
- Social predictors
  - Age (<30, 30-60, 60+)
  - Sex
- Linguistic predictors
  - Sentential aspect
  - Lexical aspect
  - Adverbial specification
  - Following phonological segment
Comeau (2011): Variationist analysis

• Social predictors
  – AGE: older people favour -s
  – SEX: men favour -s

• Linguistic predictors
  – OLD SPEAKERS: aspect (sentential & lexical) → conservative
  – MIDDLE SPEAKERS: lexical aspect
  – YOUNG SPEAKERS: adverbial specification → innovative, i.e. traditional constraints no longer operative
Comeau (2011): Minimalist syntax

- Verbal -s is an imperfective marker
- Tradition system: one Aspect head (Asp)
  Innovative system: two Aspect heads (Asp¹, Asp²)
  - Asp¹: add –s
  - Asp²: bare verb (no -s)

Figure 2: Sentential and lexical aspect.
(Comeau 2011: 37)


References


