

Systems Theory and the Description of Emerging Patterns of Language Variation

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Variation study traditionally seeks information from social science disciplines to inform sociolinguistic description such as socioeconomic class indices, social network theory, or communities of practice (CoP). However, in analyzing emerging communities such as the Latino communities currently being established in the Mid-Atlantic South, these models that focus on established, stable communities are often inadequate. Accordingly, more flexible tools that demonstrate individuals' relationships to other individuals and to institutions within their communities must be considered in order to describe and understand emerging patterns of language variation. This study utilizes eco-maps, an instrument used for over twenty years in the social sciences to identify an individual's relationship with community systems, to explain the patterns of four linguistic variables in two emerging North Carolina bilingual communities: quotative be like, negative concord, syllable-coda consonant cluster reduction, and habitual be.

Participants in this study were Spanish-English bilingual children from Durham, North Carolina, an urban multiethnic piedmont community, and Hickory, North Carolina, a largely Anglo community located in foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Twenty-four children between the ages of six and sixteen participated in the study. Data was collected through sociolinguistic interviews and an eco-map systems evaluation. The ecosystem profile consists of identifying institutions, groups, and individuals that influence the participant's life with the added advantage of tracking "disrupted" relationships. These individuals and institutions are drawn in a map-like form and connected together using coded lines to indicate aspects of the participant's relationships to the various salient members and organizations of their community. This rating allows participants to express attitudes towards groups, individuals, and organizations that may impact language accommodation or lack thereof. The investigator may then chart and compare the impact of such relationships on language across individuals, families, and communities.

Quotative be like, negative concord, consonant cluster reduction, and habitual be were tabulated through NC SLAAP, a sociolinguistic software analysis program. Further, information from the eco-maps was coded for participants in terms of relationships and positive or negative attitudes regarding these relationships. Correlations between standard demographic information such as community and age were analyzed. Participants were further divided in terms of those who followed majority community patterns and those who did not, so-called “outliers.”

The patterning indicates a distinct split between the younger students, who use fewer vernacular features, and the older students, who have a higher incidence of vernacular features. Community differences also emerge, as the Latinos living in the more ethnically-diverse community settings use a slightly higher incidence of vernacular structures. However, the eco-map profiles provide a more in-depth understanding of these correlations. The outliers demonstrate unique patterns of relationships to their communities, frequently showing less integration into Latino communities or leadership roles that set them apart. The results indicate that increased understanding about how individuals interact with community systems offers more insight into understanding how vernacular linguistic variables pattern than does the appeal to social networks, CoPs, or demographic information alone.