

Transatlantic Connections: Ingressive Discourse Particles and the Diffusion of Non-Linguistic Constraints

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While the variationist literature has amply demonstrated that the cross-dialect transfer of linguistic features may be accompanied by the diffusion of social constraints (e.g. gender effects) associated with such features, this issue has received comparatively little attention within a cross-linguistic framework. Rather, research on language contact has tended to focus on the linguistic nature of borrowing (i.e., lexical vs. structural; see for example Thomason and Kaufman 1988, King 2000), as opposed to the social embedding of cross-linguistic feature transfer.

This paper investigates the existence of social and pragmatic constraints relating to an unusual case of cross-linguistic diffusion of a paralinguistic feature – the pulmonic ingressive articulation of discourse particles representing *yes* and *no* (e.g. Swedish/Norwegian/Danish *ja, jo, (h)mm, nej/nei*; English *yeah, mm, no*). With the exception of a single case native to the Americas (Hill and Zepeda 1999), ingressive particles have been documented only for (northern) European languages, as well as the English of Atlantic Canada and New England. Settlement history suggests a language contact phenomenon, with introduction of ingressives to the British Isles and Ireland by early Scandinavian settlers, and, centuries later, their westward expansion via transatlantic migration. Apart from their mere attestation (e.g. Kurath et al. 1943, Paddock 1981, Pratt 1988), ingressive particles have received little attention in the linguistic literature (see e.g. Peters 1981, Pitschmann 1987, Kobayashi 2001).

Two languages (Swedish and Newfoundland English) displaying robust use of ingressive discourse particles, and representative of the eastern and western edges of the ingressive areal zone, were selected for cross-linguistic comparison. Results are based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of two taped corpora involving same- and mixed-sex conversational interaction: the Göteborg Spoken Language Corpus of Swedish (Allwood et al. 2000), which yielded 1362 ingressive variants among 60,000 discourse particle tokens; and a c. 50,000 word corpus of informal Newfoundland English (592 ingressives in a total of 3273 particles). Though interspeaker variability is evident in the two corpora, there are clear gender parallels: in both Swedish and Newfoundland English, ingressive particles are associated more with women's than with men's speech. Obvious pragmatic parallels also exist. In both corpora, ingressives are much more likely than their egressive counterparts to carry the pragmatic meaning of [+affiliative], in the sense of presumption of shared background knowledge among interactants. From a discourse perspective, ingressive particles are linked to active as well as passive listenership in both languages. They also display three similar principal turn-regulation functions: back-channel "continuers," conveying a listener's lack of intent to assume the floor; signals of turn initiation; and signals of turn completion (cf. Stølen 1994, Kobayashi 2001).

The striking social and pragmatic parallels associated with ingressive particle use in Swedish and Newfoundland English provide evidence that cross-linguistic feature transfer may be accompanied by the diffusion of non-linguistic constraints on feature usage. As transmission in this instance must have involved considerable stability over space and time, it may well have been reinforced by shared cultural norms concerning appropriate verbal interactional roles for women and men.

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