

Self-Identification, Accommodation, the Linguistic Marketplace, and Individual Change: A Longitudinal Study of Phonology

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While the working hypothesis that language is set at adolescence has been very useful, exceptions to this claim can provide insights concerning social motivations for language change in the larger community.

Quantitative data from both consonants and vowels-- especially (r) and (ay)-- of one woman, native speaker of a regional standard, establishes a phonological base-line at age 15, shows a radical change by age 37, and a reversal back toward the earlier values by age 50. The two changes coincide with geographical relocations as well as career realignments. While her negative attitude toward her home town is an important factor in the first change, there is also evidence that the linguistic marketplace and accommodation to a new local norm were also strong factors. The reversal seen at age 50 can be attributed to both her return to her native region and to a decision to leave the professional marketplace where accommodation to a super-local norm might still have been an issue.

Contrastive data from another woman of the same age and social class, who did not leave the original region, did not have the negative attitude, and worked in a different professional sector, highlights the importance of these factors. The second woman was interviewed at ages 15 and 35, with no major change noted, but with quite a different personal history.

As a general rule we probably can still assume that dialect will remain fixed after adolescence. However, as our society becomes more mobile there will be growing evidence for the fact that dialect is not necessarily hardwired in by age 12. Moreover, increasing amounts of data will help us determine which factors have a strong enough influence to produce not just crossing and stylization (Rampton 1995; Cutler 1999; Johnstone 1999), but actual language change.

The data for both women was extracted from tape-recorded interviews conducted by the same interviewer over a period of 35 years.