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Abstract

Leaders of linguistic change in Early Modern England

By offering analyses in real time, historical studies increase our understanding of the diffusion of linguistic changes. I am interested in who or what kind of people led linguistic changes in the past. The present paper focuses on the leaders of two well-known changes in English, the replacement of the subject pronoun *ye* by the object form *you* (*ye come* > *you come*) and the change of the third-person singular suffix *-th* into *-s* (*he singeth* > *he sings*).

The data have been retrieved from the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC; 1410-1681, c. 2.7 million words of personal letters). The social backgrounds of its nearly 800 writers have been encoded into a separate database, providing material for sociolinguistic analyses. This study makes use of c. 1.2 million words, covering the timespan 1460-1599.

For capturing variation between different types of early leaders the data were divided into two categories: (1) incipient phase, when the total share of the incoming form in the corpus was below 16% and (2) new and vigorous phase, when the corresponding proportion was 16-35% (cf. Labov 1994: 79-82). During phase (1) people who used the new form in over 30% of the cases were considered leaders, while in phase (2) the corresponding limit was 50%. For *ye>you* 4 incipient and 7 new and vigorous leaders were identified among 86 informants (with 10 occurrences or more), while for *-th>-s* the corresponding numbers were 7 and 6 out of a total of 107 informants.

The two changes ran different courses. *Ye>you* was a rapid change, completed by 1600, with limited linguistic and nonlinguistic complexity, whereas the much slower *-th>-s* involved phonological and lexical conditioning in addition to complex social embedding (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2000, 2003).

My main findings are:

1. To a large extent, the leaders' social profiles can be predicted from the different trajectories of the changes. Although the two changes proceeded in parallel, they were led by different individuals. This suggests that we can hardly characterise people as advanced (or conservative) in relation to language change in general.
2. The curvilinear hypothesis may find support in the fact that the incipient leaders of *you* and *-s* represented the middle ranks (merchants, professionals). The phase-(2) leaders of *you* came from the upper echelons, and it seems that the rapid diffusion of *you* was in fact guaranteed by its early endorsement by the topmost ranks. The first attempt of *-s* to spread failed, as it was not accepted by the upper ranks until after 1580, when this change reached its new and vigorous phase.
3. The incipient and new and vigorous leaders differed in their social networks. Despite difficulties in network reconstruction, I'd like to suggest that the geographically mobile incipient leaders were members of weak-tie networks (Milroy 1992), whereas the new and vigorous leaders – among them the rulers of the country, King Henry VIII and Queen

Elizabeth I – resembled the linguistic leaders of Philadelphia, central individuals in their networks (Labov 2001).

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