

## Language Change in Apparent and Real Time, the Community and the Individual

Natalie Schilling-Estes

Linguistics Department, Georgetown University

Since William Labov's (1963) pioneering work on language variation and change in Martha's Vineyard and New York City in the 1960s, most variationist investigations of language change in progress have invested change in apparent time—that is, in the speech of individuals of different generations at a given moment in time—rather than real time. This approach is based on the so-called 'apparent time construct', which holds that, for the most part, the core features of an individual's vernacular or 'baseline' language variety are solidified for life by the time they reach their late teens. The robustness of the apparent time construct has been borne out in a number of studies over the past four decades. However, questions regarding the generalizability of the apparent time construct remain (e.g. Bailey 2002), and despite the difficulties of obtaining real time data, such data are a crucial supplement to apparent time data and in addition form the basis of continued research into how strongly we can rely on the apparent time construct in future studies.

In the present study, I compare changes observed in apparent time data from the mid-1980s in the historically isolated community of Smith Island, MD, with real time data obtained in 1999-2001. Both trend and panel methodologies were used (i.e. both new speakers and previous study participants were included), enabling us to examine both community-wide and individual language changes. The Smith Island community is of particular interest since (a) its unique dialect of American English is endangered, and (b) the change patterns observed in apparent time indicated that dialect loss was proceeding via *CONCENTRATION*, or the intensification of the dialect among fewer speakers, rather than the more usual path of *DISSIPATION*—that is, the gradual loss of dialectal distinctiveness as the variety moves toward death.

Results of the trend study indicate that the change patterns observed in apparent time for two phonological features (the pronunciation of /ay/ with a raised nucleus and of /aw/ with a fronted glide) are sustained in real time, with today's youngest speakers maintaining and even heightening their usage levels for these distinguishing dialect features. Results of the panel study (in which usage levels for distinguishing pronunciation features in the speech of individual speakers are compared across the two time periods) are still preliminary. However, they serve to point out the importance of considering the contextual surroundings of the data-gathering session in comparing data from different time periods. A host of factors besides genuine change in individual speech patterns can affect even seemingly 'neutral' sociolinguistic interview data, including not only controllable factors such as setting and interviewer identity, but also less tangible matters such as how the interview participants conceptualize, or frame, the interview event—for example, as a formal interview or a casual conversation. The present study thus demonstrates that the variationist investigation of language change is enriched not only by including data from various time periods but also by incorporating more qualitative perspectives, including discourse analytic and social psychological, into our largely quantitative investigations.

### REFERENCES:

Labov, William. 1963. The social motivation of a sound change. *Word* 19.273-307.

Bailey, Guy. 2002. Real and apparent time. *The handbook of language variation and change*, ed. by J. K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes, 312-332. Oxford/Malden: Blackwell.