Understanding Dialect Recession: Integrating Real and Apparent Time

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The appeal to real-time studies of language variation in the last decade has raised a number of theoretical, descriptive, and methodological questions about the nature of dialect recession and assumptions related to the apparent-time construct (Sankoff 2006). What types of language change may take place in the lifespan of speakers and how does this affect our understanding of dialect recession? How do groups and individuals manifest language variation during the terminal stages of dialect dissipation? Can moribund dialects be revitalized or reconfigured to preserve sociolinguistic uniqueness? While addressing these issues, real-time studies of language change raise issues about comparability since the analysis assumes similar social contexts for data collection, parallel representation of linguistic variables and speakers, and equivalent normalization of measurement techniques.

We consider the integration of real-time and apparent-time perspectives by re-examining language change on Ocracoke Island, the site of an extensive study of dialect recession more than a decade ago (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999). In the past two years, we have interviewed more than 50 speakers from Ocracoke including (a) a subset speakers from the original subject pool for a panel study; (b) an extended subsample of subjects representing different generations within the same family; (c) a sample of the current adolescent and teenaged population for a trend study; and (d) a social network of males in their 20s and 30s who constitute a Community-of-Practice analog of the “poker game” network described in earlier studies (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995, 1997, D’Andrea 2007).

Ethnographic interviews have also been conducted in order to determine how the Ocracoke Brogue is now viewed in light of the heightened attention given to the dialect through one of the most intensive dialect awareness programs ever undertaken in sociolinguistics.

Variables considered in the re-examination of Ocracoke speech include the iconic backing of the nucleus of the /ai/ vowel associated with “Hoi Toider” speech, the front-gliding of the /au/ in the mouth vowel, past tense be leveling in negative constructions (e.g. It weren’t me), and static locative to (e.g. She’s to the store). The comparison of dialect structures for speakers re-interviewed after more than a decade indicates relative stability in the life cycle of these speakers, but younger speakers are more vulnerable to shifts as they move into adulthood. Overall language recession continues in terms of traditional, socially marked features, though some selective focusing may persist as a part of dialect reconfiguration. Isolated younger speakers may still exhibit features of the traditional “brogue”, but they are considered to be exceptions, even by native islanders. The evidence also indicates that the extensive dialect awareness program implemented in Ocracoke has changed how islanders view their dialect heritage, but that only a few traditional, iconic lexical items have indeed been revitalized. The study also raises a number of important methodological and descriptive cautions about real-time studies, ranging from assumptions about social conditions in interviewing and time increments in the lifespan of speakers to the comparability of instrumental measurement and data-extraction techniques.

References