'Don’t do it, Mark! Don’t kill yersel’!’: Individuals, TV, and language variation and change

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Although the role of the broadcast media, and especially television, in transmitting language change is disputed, recent research is starting to provide intriguing pieces of evidence to open up the debate (Stuart-Smith 2006). For example, Carvalho (2004) argues for a conscious orientation towards forms of Brazilian Portuguese presented on TV by members of a Uruguayan Portuguese community; Dion and Poplack (2007) consider, and reject, scripted media as plausible models involved in spreading the quotative *be like* in Canada; and a recent project in Scotland investigating the possible impact of popular TV dramas set in London on the spread of TH- and DH-fronting and L-vocalization in Glaswegian vernacular, has revealed consistent robust statistical links with specific programmes, alongside opportunities for contact with family and friends in the South of England, and specific social practices, amongst other factors. These last findings move the debate concerning the influence of the media on language forward considerably, but their interpretation depends on additional evidence beyond the correlations.

One area of focus is individual behaviour. In sociolinguistics (e.g. Milroy 1992) and media studies (e.g. McQuail 2005), and also particularly diffusion research (e.g. Rogers 2003), emphasis has been placed on how an individual’s personal characteristics, and behaviour with respect to others in social groupings, may facilitate the spread of language variants/social behaviours/innovations. The individual is also important in current research which concentrates on the construction of sociolinguistic identity (e.g. Eckert 2000).

This paper presents evidence for the role of the individual in the changes observed in Glasgow project. The data are taking from recordings from 36 working-class adolescents, in three age groups, reading wordlists, talking with a friend, and taking part in a filmed television quiz show. We look at patterns of linguistic variation for (θ) (ð) and (l) for individual speakers, and consider how these relate to a range of constructs, including: adopter categorization; position in peer network; stylistic response to tasks within the study; overall social profile; and media engagement, particularly with London-based dramas. Our results emphasize the need to take into account the behaviour of individual speakers. We conclude by discussing how these findings relate to understanding media influence on language in terms of models of linguistic appropriation from media sources (cf Holly *et al* 2001).

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