

## Patterns of age-based linguistic variation in American English

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In variationist research, speaker age is considered the primary correlate of language change (Chambers 2002), and as such is generally included as independent variable in studies of language change. However, in contrast with other social variables (e.g., sex, socio-economic class), in sociolinguistics, age has not typically been of interest in and of itself: “there has been little, if any, research that has had age differences in language use as its primary focus” (Cheshire 1987: 766). There is a dearth of research investigating “how word use changes across the life span” (Pennebaker, Mehl and Niederhoffer 2003: 556). Indeed, most prior mainstream sociolinguistic research has focused on morpho-phonological variation, while syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic variation have remained under-investigated (Cheshire 2005). In sum, we know relatively little about how speakers from different age groups might differ in their linguistic choices, particularly at the lexico-grammatical level. Syntactic, lexical and pragmatic variation however cannot be tackled the same way as phonological variation, where a linguistic variable is identified by circumscribing relevant variants. Rather, we need approaches taking into account the fact that the social embedding of these forms may involve forms drawn from other linguistic levels beside themselves (Cheshire 2005).

The present study employed key word analysis (Scott 1999) to begin to address linguistic variation across the life-span. Key word analysis is a statistical procedure that allows to identify the most significant differences between two given texts, and is thus particularly suited to exploration of major lexico-grammatical differences. The study explored age-based lexico-grammatical variation in a large corpus of spontaneous conversation in American English (ca. 610,000 words) drawn from the Longman Spoken American Corpus (Biber et al. 1999), which includes transcribed recordings of casual conversation from speakers recruited in various US states. Two sub-samples of equal size (ca. 200,000 words) representing the speech from two distinct age groups, namely speakers aged 15-25 and speakers 35-60, were extracted and then subjected to key word analysis.

Interpretation of the key words revealed that spontaneous conversation is characterized by important age-based lexico-grammatical differences. First, younger speakers make outstandingly frequent use of slang words (both swear words and non-derogatory words), polite speech-act formulae, inserts, attitudinal adjectives, intensifiers, discourse markers, first and second person pronouns, stance adverbs, and quotative verbs. In contrast, older speakers favor modal verbs. In general, older speakers’ patterns of language use can be characterized as a departure from younger speakers’ norms (e.g., lower use of attitudinal adjectives, intensifiers, etc.). Second, going beyond sheer frequency, younger speakers tend to rely on a small set of items that are often non-clausal and multi-functional, that is span more than one lexico-grammatical category.

These differences are interpreted as manifestation of a unitary construct: *stance*, the manifestation of speaker’s feelings, attitudes, emotions, and assessments (Biber et al. 1999: 966). Specifically, it is argued that the instantiation of speaker’s stance is much more salient and plays a bigger role in younger speakers’ interactions, than in older

speakers' interactions; older speakers appear to be relatively less inclined to overt displays of personal stance.

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