Adult Linguistic Stability and the Gathering of Linguistic Evidence

David Bowie

University of Central Florida dbowie@pegasus.cc.ucf.edu

The use of linguistic evidence is based on a number of methodological assumptions. In some cases, if the assumptions are false, the evidence that has been collected is most likely useless for the purposes it was gathered for. For example, in order for introspective syntactic evidence on the structure of German to be valid, the individual judging grammaticality must be assumed to be applying the rules of a native speaker of German, not French. Similarly, a sociolinguistic study of Southern American English based on recorded interviews must be assumed to include individuals who actually speak that variety, not Irish English.

Other assumptions are more subtle, in that their falsification would not necessarily make the evidence gathered using them useless, but would create serious problems for analyses of the data. This poster focuses on an assumption of sociolinguistics that has ramifications for the gathering of evidence in other subfields of linguistics.

The apparent time construct (Bailey, 2002) holds that diachronic linguistic change can be observed synchronically by sampling speakers of various ages from a particular speech community and then projecting the linguistic behavior of the speakers into the past. Since, according to the apparent time construct, speakers' linguistic behaviors give insight into the time when they were first acquiring language, one can get a picture of changes in progress over the course of time without having to go through the bother (and expense!) of longitudinal studies.

That, of course, is one of the major reasons that apparent time is widely used, and has been the dominant method in sociolinguistics for studying linguistic change since perhaps even before Labov's (1963, 1966) initial apparent-time studies. However, there is a danger in bypassing studies of real time in favor of collecting evidence on linguistic change using studies of apparent time: The apparent time construct rests on a number of incompletely tested premises, including the assumption that individuals' core linguistic behaviors remain effectively unchanged throughout their adult lifespan, absent significant linguistic pressures such as injury leading to aphasia, constant second language immersion, or the like. The literature on this assumption, however, is decidedly mixed. Of those studies that have looked directly at the question of whether individuals' core linguistic behaviors remain stable throughout their lifespan, some have come to the conclusion that the assumption of adult linguistic stability is correct (Ashby, 2001; Bailey, 2002; Bhat, 1970), some have concluded that, at least for some variables, it is incorrect (Blondeau, 2001; Bowie, 2005; Callou, Moraes, and Leite, 1998), and some have come to what might best be called a "hybrid" approach (Morillo-Velarde Perez, 2001; Nahkola and Saanilahti, 2004; Trudgill, 1988).

I investigate the issue further by using data from two related sociolinguistic studies of Waldorf, a medium-sized town in Southern Maryland. I begin by extending my earlier (2001) investigation of Waldorf / /-monophthongization deeper into apparent time by adding data from the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States and a previously uninvestigated data source, a collection of oral histories recorded in the 1960s and early 1970s. This new data allows me to push the apparent time analysis several decades further back; the resulting trends shown by the new data combined with my earlier results shows a major disconnect between the data sources. Although one might be tempted to attribute this to the radically different collection methods for LAMSAS on the one hand and my earlier data and the oral histories (which both consist largely of narratives) on the other hand, an analysis excluding the LAMSAS data comes to the same conclusion: As a predictor of the rate of / /-monophthongization, when the data was collected from a speaker is at least as important as the year of birth of a given speaker. However, if the assumption that adult speakers are linguistically stable is correct, then when the data was collected should have little or no effect.

However, such results are not a death knell for the assumption of adult linguistic stability, given Nahkola and Saanilahti's (2004) finding that linguistic behaviors acquired as variable behaviors may shift during one's adult lifespan. Therefore, we must look at the linguistic behavior of adults over real time.

Since I have investigated changes in the linguistic behavior of adults over the relatively long term (twenty to forty years) elsewhere (Bowie, 2005), here I look at the stability of adult linguistic behavior in the short term. As part of a larger study, I elicited narratives from three adult females (all interviewed separately in their homes) on two separate occasions about a year and a half apart, using similar prompts each time. Post-interview debriefing after the second round of interviews revealed that the subjects did not recall details of the first round of interviews.

The recordings of these interviews were then subjected to acoustic and impressionistic analyses of the individuals' phonetic production, as well as an analysis of certain lexical variables. The results of these analyses reveal small but significant differences in each individual's linguistic production from one interview to the next—or, put differently, these adults could not be relied on to produce precisely the same linguistic responses over even a relatively short period of time. This not only causes problems for the claim that adult vernaculars are stable (and

therefore for the apparent time construct), but also raises questions about how best to elicit linguistic evidence from individuals.

This finding has ramifications for all fields that use data from speakers—how can a researcher know that the linguistic behavior being observed (or even that the grammatical intuition of a given native speaker of a language) is actually reliably representative of that individual's overall behavior? In response to this (somewhat frightening) question, I present possible ways that different linguistic subfields may deal with the issue.

References

- Ashby, W.J. (2001). Un nouveau regard sur la chute du ne en francais parle tourangeau: S'agit-il d'un changement en cours? Journal of French Language Studies, **11**: 1-22.
- Bailey, G. (2002). Real and apparent time. In J.K. Chambers, P. Trudgill, and N. Schilling-Estes, eds., The Handbook of Language Variation and Change, pp. 312-332.
- Bhat, D.N.S. (1970). Age-grading and sound change. Word, 26: 262-270.
- Blondeau, H. (2001). Real-time changes in the paradigm of personal pronouns in Montreal French. Journal of Sociolinguistics 5: 453-474.
- Bowie, D. (2001). The diphthongization of /ay/: Abandoning a Southern norm in Southern Maryland. Journal of English Linguistics, **29**: 329-345.

——. In press. Language change over the lifespan: A test of the apparent time construct. In S.E. Wagner, ed., Selected Papers from NWAV 33, pp. 45-58.

Callou, D., J. Moraes, and Y. Leite. (1998). Apagamento do R final no dialeto carioca: Um estudo em tempo aparente e em tempo real. DELTA: Documentação de Estudos em Lingüística Teórica e Aplicada, 14: 61-72.

Labov, W. (1963). The social motivation of a sound change. Word, 19: 273-309.

——. (1966). The social stratification of English in New York City. Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC.

- Morillo-Velarde Perez, R. (2001). Sociolinguistica en el ALEA: Variable generacional y cambio linguistico. Estudios de Linguistica, **15**: 13-49.
- Nahkola, K. and M. Saanilahti. (2004). Mapping language changes in real time: A panel study on Finnish. Language Variation and Change, **16**: 75-92.
- Trudgill, P. (1988). Norwich revisited: Recent linguistic changes in an English urban dialect. English World-Wide, **9**: 33-49.