

Calibrate to innovate: variation and change between childhood and adolescence

In order to become integrated members of their speech communities, young speakers face a number of sociolinguistic challenges. One task is that they must tune their use of variable forms in line with sociolinguistic rules of the broader speech community. At the same time, they must also identify which variables are in a state of ongoing change and become the leaders. Children must therefore conform to some norms by becoming adept at adult-like patterns of style shifting, whilst overstepping others by developing into the leaders of change. In other words, children must learn and obey the rules, but also break them. Over the course of this development, children undergo 'vernacular reorganisation' (Labov, 2001) where they move away from the parent-oriented models of early childhood, shift towards the peer-oriented models of adolescence, and finally settle on their relatively stable adult systems.

In this talk I present an examination of vernacular reorganisation as it plays out in real time. The data come from Hastings, a coastal town in southeast England part of the larger Southern British English (SBE) dialect region. The sample consists of 13 speakers, and targets a key phase in development – childhood to adolescence. The speakers were initially interviewed aged 9-11, and then again 4 years later, aged 13-15. A further corpus in the form of an age stratified adult corpus of speech from the same community forms a baseline for comparison.

In order to investigate how young speakers cope with the various, potentially competing, sociolinguistic demands, I present analyses across four different features:

1. GOOSE-fronting: a socially unmarked change in progress
2. TH-fronting: a rapidly shifting stigmatised change in progress
3. T-glottaling: a steadily shifting stigmatised change in progress
4. /s/-realisation: a stable but gendered variable feature

Comparison of these features across real and apparent time reveals how patterns observable in the wider community affect the ease at which young speakers calibrate their variable use. Moreover, how the ease of this calibration affects when, and to what extent, the developing speakers innovate within their own systems. Observing vernacular reorganisation from the perspective of both real and apparent time sheds light on the mechanism of change, while comparison across multiple features types affords a glimpse into the 'why' of vernacular reorganisation: what motivates young speakers to shift in the ways that they do?