

Vernacular Maintenance (or the Lack Thereof) and the Apparent Time Construct

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For more than half a century the apparent time construct (the use of generational differences among adults as a surrogate for real time linguistic differences) has been a standard tool for the synchronic approach to language change. A basic premise of that construct is that for the most part the vernaculars of adults remain stable throughout their lives. While the only systematic test of apparent time provided strong validation for the construct (Bailey, Wikle, Tillery, and Sand, 1991), serious questions about the premise of “vernacular maintenance” have arisen over the last decade as researchers have increasingly explored trajectories of individual vernaculars. Real time studies have provided data leading some researchers to conclude that individual vernaculars are *not* stable over the adult years but actually continue to change in various ways. If the premise of vernacular maintenance is questionable, of course, then the apparent time construct is as well.

This paper reexamines the concepts of vernacular maintenance and apparent time using two real-time data sets that bear directly on them. One, the Springville Project, includes a panel survey of a rural Texas community that examines the evolution of individual vernaculars over the course of a quarter century. The other, the Linguistic Survey of the Southern Great Plains (LSSGP), comprises a random sample of 880 Texans and 174 Oklahomans interviewed in 2014-15 and is part of a trend survey that also includes two random sample surveys (a Grammatical Investigation of Texas Speech [GRITS] and a Survey of Oklahoma Dialects [SOD]) done 25 years earlier.

Comparisons of data from LSSGP with GRITS/SOD provide strong confirmation of the apparent time construct with two important caveats. First, the data shows evidence of life cycle change, with some in older age groups shifting in the direction of changes in progress. For instance, it is not surprising that 84% of LSSGP respondents born after 1984 and 66% of those born between 1972 and 1984 use quotative *be like*; it is surprising that more than a third born before 1945 do. The use of *be like* by the oldest group represents a change toward a recent innovation. Second, changes in the demographic profile of the population often lead to the apparent decline in the use of some features even though the pattern of distribution across age groups remain the same. For instance, the apparent time distribution of *fixin to* is similar in LSSGP and GRITS, but the use of the feature is 10-15% less in LSSGP for each age group. This ostensible decline is actually the result of changes in the demographic composition of Texas. Data from the Springville Project provide strong support for the concept of vernacular maintenance, but again with two caveats. First, many ostensible changes in the trajectories of individual vernaculars are actually just methodological effects, consequences of small n's or the Gap Effect (Cukor-Avila and Bailey, 2015). Second, the data shows some possibility of life cycle changes. More generally, LSSGP and the Springville Project provide strong confirmation of the apparent time construct.