

Submission 62

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Age vectors of categorical variables: quantifying speakers' knowledge about ongoing syntactic changes in Shetland Scots

While sociolinguistic research of the past decades has shown that language changes spread within and across social groups in an orderly fashion, exactly how speech communities come to agree on adopting a new convention is still unclear. Recently, speakers' ability to detect ongoing changes has been proposed as a possible solution to this problem of incrementation: the so-called 'age vector' — a measure of the direction and rate of an ongoing change — offers a mechanism that would allow speakers to systematically advance language changes across generations (Labov 2001; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2009; Labov 2014).

In addition to a wealth of qualitative and anecdotal evidence regarding individuals' metalinguistic awareness of the direction of changes (see e.g. Guy 2003, p.398; Tagliamonte 2012), quantitative investigations within the domain of continuous sound change have revealed both explicit (Carrera-Sabaté 2014) and implicit knowledge (Hay, Warren, and Drager 2006; Drager 2011) of ongoing sound changes in the individual.

In the present work we extend this line of research on individuals' perception of age vectors to categorical variables. Based on an earlier methodology from Trudgill (1972), we devised a 5-item questionnaire to investigate speakers' explicit knowledge about syntactic changes currently taking place in the variety of Scots spoken in Shetland, an island group to the North of Great Britain with about 20000 speakers. The questionnaire juxtaposed the following minimal pairs of three changing constructions (outgoing variants given first), as well as a stable control variable which is patterned geographically within Shetland and not undergoing change.

77 participants were asked to estimate the relative usage of the competing variants for different age and speaker groups within their community on a 5-point ordinal scale, alongside qualitative impressions of the 'age' of the variants themselves. Results show that individuals reliably perceive differences in apparent time that are consistent with the ongoing changes. Between-participant differences also show that younger informants are more likely to report their own usage to be advanced over the community average. These results indicate that people are reliably capable of determining the direction of changes, even for syntactic variables that are much less frequent in spontaneous speech than the phonetic ones investigated previously. Alongside our quantitative results we also discuss the challenge of disentangling metalinguistic knowledge about age stratification and linguistic attitudes. Our analysis shows that beliefs about the age of linguistic variants can explain some, but not all, of the perceived differences in apparent time. Conversely, the responses to the stable control variable revealed informants' implicit beliefs and attitudes regarding different age groups, highlighting how our novel methodology can complement attitudinal data in important ways.