

To peak or not to peak: Exploring the incrementation of linguistic change

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Language change has consistently exhibited an S-shaped trajectory (Weinreich et al. 1968; Bailey 1973; Labov 1994, 2001). In accounting for this pattern, two issues arise: how a change progresses across successive generations (i.e. transmission) and what the mechanism by which it advances may be (i.e. incrementation). Because the progression of a change cannot be divorced from the social context in which it is embedded, transmission and incrementation intersect. The problem of incrementation is particularly intriguing because apparent time studies have revealed that rather than continuing ever upward among younger and younger speakers, there is a peak in the curve, typically situated among adolescents (e.g. Cedergren 1988:54). Based on a series of phonological changes in Philadelphia, Labov (2001:455) proposes a formal model of incrementation in which the peak is incorporated as "a general requirement" of change in progress, falling out in part from the (putative) stabilization of the vernacular after approximately age 17.

This paper endeavours to extend the relevance of the incrementation model by considering the results of six ongoing, non-phonological, changes in another of North American city. Three are morphosyntactic: HAVE TO for expressing obligation/necessity, GOING TO for encoding future temporal reference, and HAVE for marking stative possession. Three are discourse-pragmatic: LIKE as a discourse marker, SO as an intensifying adverb, and BE LIKE as a quotative complementizer. The data come from a stratified sample of 152 speakers between the ages of 9 and 92 and the analysis is based on accountable quantitative study of 21,000 tokens.

The results reveal that morphosyntactic and discourse-pragmatic variables are also characterized by an adolescent peak. Moreover, the peak obtains among the same age cohorts as in Labov (2001). This suggests that these components of the grammar stabilize around the same time as does the phonology. Further, the results confirm that the manifestation of a peak in apparent time is dependent on the speed at which a change is progressing. This corroborates Labov's assertion that the peak will be most evident in new and vigorous changes (i.e. those captured during the upswing of the S-curve). However, what causes the peak itself? In Labov's model, the pinnacle-like pattern is due to the fact that women persistently increase their use of incoming forms until stabilization. In contrast, men assume the regular step-wise increment inherited from their caretakers. Our results demonstrate that while men may lag behind their female peers, they too exhibit heightened use of incoming forms just before stabilization. We argue that the adolescent peak is indeed a concomitant of vigorous developments in a community grammar, however it is also a measure of the degree of active participation in ongoing change. The importance of participation is thus critical, suggesting that transmission and incrementation must be viewed not only in terms of the stage and rate of development of the underlying system under investigation, but also as a product of a particular socio-historical point in time.

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