A dialect landscape of linguistic change: The view from Canada

Sali A. Tagliamonte
University of Toronto

In this presentation I synthesize the results arising from a research program studying the transmission and diffusion of linguistic change in Ontario, Canada’s largest province. Two contrasting linguistic features, each from distinct levels of grammar encapsulate the emerging findings: (1) stative possession and (2) quotatives.

(1) He has a fishing boat but it’s got music in it.
(2) And he said, "What are you insane?" I’m like, "What does insane mean?"

The trajectories of change for these variables in Toronto, the largest city in Canada (Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2007; Tagliamonte, D’Arcy and Jankowski 2010) provide a base-line. Although Canadian English is often thought to be one large dialect from sea to sea (Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006); this homogeneity is an urban phenomenon (Chambers 1991:93). In recent years, fieldwork in cities and towns outlying the city are beginning to unearth a more nuanced picture of these developments (e.g. Tagliamonte & Denis 2008).

The data come from a small city and a smaller town in the southeast, one 2 and the other 4 hours away from the city (Belleville and Lakefield); and two small cities due north, one 300 and the other 800 kilometers away (Porcupine and North Bay). How are the changes in Toronto in (1-2) proceeding in these communities?

According to the wave model, linguistic change should spread outward from an originating centre while the cascade model predicts that change should diffuse to larger centers before small ones (Trudgill 1974). Thus, we might hypothesize that those distant from the city will provide a view of an earlier stage in the history of the changes in (1-2) and that the larger communities will be furthest ahead while the smaller, remote towns will lag behind. However, the progression of change also depends on how the change is diffused and by whom as well as its linguistic complexity (Kerswill 1996; Labov 2007). Longitudinal grammatical changes such as the development of possessive have can expected to exhibit parallel developments in core vs. peripheral contexts through normal processes of transmission in each locale. However, a recent innovation such as quotative be like can be expected to be the product of diffusion.

Early results from southern Ontario (Tagliamonte & Denis 2008) revealed remarkable constancy across core and peripheral areas for both these features; however, with the addition of the two northern cities a more nuanced picture is emerging. The frequency of incoming forms, whether have or be like, is progressing in tandem regardless of locale; however the constraints within each system are differentiated by community. In southern Ontario where British ancestry is predominant, the full gamut of older constraints is
present. Far afield in the north, however, where there were mixed ethnic founders from the outset and a distinct economic, social and cultural base, these same constraints have been lost or weakened. The results show that both the system of the language as well as its socio-cultural embedding are crucial for interpreting and understanding language change.

**Selected references**


