Shifting and separating: 
Directions in individual lifespan linguistic change

This paper discusses an outstanding question in the study of post-adolescent language change, and proposes a novel direction for its resolution. The question is this: When are seeming linguistic changes truly due to linguistic change, and when are they due to individuals' situational style-shifting? Unless we separate these two possibilities, we cannot rely on either specific claims made about individuals' linguistic malleability, nor more general claims about what adults may typically modify as they age.

This question is especially pressing as panel studies, in which the same individuals are recorded at two or more points in time (Sankoff 2005), are becoming more frequent in sociolinguistics (e.g. Wagner & Sankoff 2011, Poplack & Lealess 2011). Speech samples in these studies are not fully comparable. Recording circumstances may be different at each temporal point: interviewers, topics and recording locations change, and participants become familiar with procedures. Speakers style-shift in response to situational variability, i.e. they adjust the quantity or quality of variable linguistic features in socially appropriate ways from moment to moment (Schilling-Estes 2004). Speakers also agentively exploit their sociolinguistic repertoire to index a range of social meanings such as toughness, conservatism, prissiness etc (Eckert 2008). As a result, an increase in a speaker's use of an incoming linguistic form, for example, might not be evidence for participation in a community language change, but reflect social circumstances in the interview that were favorable to a high rate of use of this form (Rickford & McNair-Knox 1996).

How can life-span change and style-shifting be teased apart? Controlling situational variables such as recording location may not be feasible, especially over long periods of time. Identifying and quantifying attributes of e.g. formal style can be subjective and controversial (Labov 2001, Sigley 1997). Ideally, intraindividual style-shifting would be eliminated from the recording process altogether. While this is impossible, sociolinguists could isolated populations in which style-shifting might be minimal (Schreier 2011), or as I propose here, at people with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

High-functioning autistics undergo relatively normal language acquisition and development, but do not acquire social constraints on variability, at least in pragmatics (Bartlett, Armstrong & Roberts 2005). I hypothesized that they would therefore exhibit little to no style-shifting. A small pilot study of (t)-glottaling using speech from four autistic young men in two British television documentaries (The Autistic Me and My Crazy Life) indicates that while some individuals on the autism spectrum are in fact capable of style-shifting, others (e.g. Tom) are not, at least for this variable. However, the absence of style-shifting could also be due to the individual's age (Tom was 15: a near-categorical use of non-standard variants might be expected) and the limited quantity of data. Nonetheless, further exploration of the stylistic repertoires of autistic individuals could be extremely beneficial to the sociolinguistic study of lifespan change, and could also provide useful new insights into the linguistic skills of people with high-functioning autism.
References


