

LINGUISTIC CHANGE AND STABILIZATION
IN THE TRANSITION FROM
ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD

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For John Stuart, with thanks

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ABSTRACT

LANGUAGE CHANGE AND STABILIZATION IN THE TRANSITION FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD

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Apparent time studies have found that both stable and changing sociolinguistic variables demonstrate an age-graded pattern of use in any given speech community. Younger speakers, especially adolescents, use more non-standard or advanced variants than older speakers. Yet as teenagers prepare to enter college or the labor force, they appear to withdraw from non-standard or advanced variants. Real time confirmation of young people's deceleration and stabilization is lacking. Longitudinal panel studies of this period of the lifespan are relatively scarce, and are generally concerned with the linguistic outcomes of dialect contact. This research demonstrates in real time that teenagers continue to modify their sociolinguistic repertoires in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, and not always away from the direction of ongoing change.

Female students aged 16-18 at a high school in Philadelphia were recorded in two phases, each a year apart. Spontaneous speech data was collected in sociolinguistic interviews. Five linguistic variables were analyzed: two stable variables, (ing) and (dh)

and three vowel variables undergoing community change in Philadelphia: (aw), (ay0) and (e).

For both (ing) and (dh), only speakers in the highest socioeconomic group significantly decreased their use of non-standard variants over time. For the vowel variables, results varied considerably from speaker to speaker. However, there was a strong indication that speakers are likelier to slow their participation in older, more socially salient changes such as (aw) and (ay0), but to continue to participate in younger, non-salient changes such as (e). These results show that age-grading interpretations of the adolescent peak in apparent time are supported, so long as the variable in question is above the level of social awareness, and speakers become sensitive to overt community status norms as they age. The latter condition is more likely to be fulfilled by speakers from higher, rather than lower, social groups.

Finally, the study also uncovered a local social opposition between Irish and Italian peer groups in the school that correlates with one of the variables studied: (ay0). Irish girls have significantly backer nuclei than Italian girls, aligning themselves with the leaders of this change: working class men.

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