

The limits of adult linguistic stability

David Bowie
University of Central Florida
Department of English
dbowie@pegasus.cc.ucf.edu

American Dialect Society Annual Meeting
6 January 2006

THE APPARENT TIME CONSTRUCT

- ▶ Very widely used
- ▶ Quicker and less expensive than real-time studies
- ▶ Assumes (among other things) that adults are linguistically stable
- ▶ Studies of adult linguistic stability have given conflicting results

SOME STUDIES OF ADULT LINGUISTIC STABILITY

- ▶ Cukor-Avila 2000 (referenced in Bailey 2002)
- ▶ Stability over a decade
- ▶ Bowie 2005
- ▶ Instability over two to four decades
- ▶ Nahkola and Saanilahti 2004
- ▶ Mixed results over a decade
- ▶ Stability or instability depended on initial input during acquisition

THE INTERVIEWS

- ▶ Data comes from a fieldwork mistake
- ▶ Four individuals were interviewed in 1997
- ▶ The same individuals were mistakenly re-interviewed in 1998
- ▶ The same interview format was used each time
- ▶ Only one interviewee realized that these were re-interviews
- ▶ The interviewer did not recognize these were re-interviews until later
- ▶ The interview with the one who realized it is not analyzed here

THE SUBJECTS

- ▶ Helen, Elise, and Theona (all pseudonyms)
- ▶ All female lifelong residents of Waldorf, Maryland
- ▶ Helen
- ▶ Born 1978
- ▶ Elise
- ▶ Born 1946, Helen's mother
- ▶ Theona
- ▶ Born 1919, Elise's aunt

THE DATA

- ▶ Initial 10 to 15 minutes of each interview were used
- ▶ All data came from informal chatting and gossiping
- ▶ Every stressed vowel was selected and analyzed acoustically
 - ▶ Helen: 605 (1997) and 530 (1998) tokens
 - ▶ Elise: 512 (1997) and 442 (1998) tokens
 - ▶ Theona: 397 (1997) and 345 (1998) tokens

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS OF VOWEL SYSTEMS

- ▶ Helen
 - ▶ /u/ and /o/ similarly fronted word-internally and word-finally
 - ▶ /ɔ:/ and /ou/ completely merged
 - ▶ /æ/ extremely raised and fronted pre-nasally
 - ▶ Shape of system somewhat different in 1997 and 1998
- ▶ Elise
 - ▶ /u/ and /o/ similarly fronted word-internally and word-finally
 - ▶ /ɔ:/ and /ou/ completely merged
 - ▶ /æ/ extremely raised and fronted pre-nasally
 - ▶ Shape of system somewhat different in 1997 and 1998
- ▶ Theona
 - ▶ /o/ somewhat fronted word-internally and word-finally
 - ▶ /u/ more fronted word-finally than word-internally
 - ▶ Raising and fronting of pre-nasal /æ/ small to moderate

ANALYSIS

- ▶ Two related analyses conducted
 - ▶ Vowels in 1997 vs. vowels in 1998 for each speaker
 - ▶ Speakers' treatment of some mergers and distinctions in 1997 vs. 1998
- ▶ Uses t tests of F1 and F2
 - ▶ Significance threshold of p<.05
 - ▶ Vowels the same if no significant differences in F1 and F2
 - ▶ Analysis ignores other formants

TESTED VOWEL CLASSES

- ▶ Changed classes marked with ↔
- ▶ Helen
 - ▶ i ↔ iN ▶ iC ↔ iN ▶ e ↔
 - ▶ εC ↔ εN ↔ æC ↔ æN ↔
 - ▶ ai ↔ aiT ↔ aoT ↔ α ↔
 - ▶ oL ↔ o ↔ o# ↔ oC ↔
- ▶ Elise
 - ▶ i ↔ iC ↔ iN ▶ e ↔
 - ▶ εC ↔ εN ▶ æC ↔ ai ↔
 - ▶ ao ▶ α ↔ aR ↔ oL ↔
 - ▶ Λ ↔ o# ▶ oC
- ▶ Theona
 - ▶ i ↔ iC ▶ iN ▶ e
 - ▶ εC ▶ æC ▶ ai ↔ ao
 - ▶ Λ ↔ o# ▶ oC ▶ oR

MERGERS AND DISTINCTIONS ANALYZED

- ▶ Long-o word-finally vs. word-internally
- ▶ Helen and Theona: No change (no difference between environments)
- ▶ Elise: Change from more word-final fronting to no difference
- ▶ Raising of /ai/ before voiceless obstruents
- ▶ Helen: Change from raising to no raising
- ▶ Elise and Theona: Not enough data
- ▶ The *pin-pen* merger
 - ▶ Elise: Change from maintaining distinction to merger
 - ▶ Helen: No change (distinction maintained)
- ▶ Theona: Not enough data
- ▶ Raising and fronting of short-α before nasals
- ▶ Helen: No change (raising and fronting both present)
- ▶ Elise and Theona: Not enough data

SO WHAT?

- ▶ Adult linguistic production is unstable
- ▶ The apparent time construct may not always hold
- ▶ Apparent time needs to be investigated directly
 - ▶ Need to investigate validity of apparent time
 - ▶ Need to determine best interpretation of apparent time results
- ▶ Elicitation of data is problematized
- ▶ Individuals may not always be representative

SELECTED REFERENCES

- Bailey, Guy. 2005. Real and apparent time. In *The handbook of language variation and change*, ed. J.K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes, 312-332.
- , Tom Wikle, Jan Tillery, and Lori Sand. 1991. The apparent time construct. *Language variation and change* 3:241-264.
- Blondeau, H el ene. 2001. Real-time changes in the paradigm of personal pronouns in Montreal French. *Journal of sociolinguistics* 5:453-474.
- Bowie, David. 2005. Language change over the lifespan: A test of the apparent time construct. In *Papers from NAWAV 33*, ed. Suzanne Evans Wagner, 45-58.
- . 2000. The effect of geographic mobility on the retention of a local dialect. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Cukor-Avila, Patricia. 2000. The stability of individual vernaculars. Unpublished ms., University of North Texas. (Referenced in Bailey 2005).
- Herman, Einar. 1929. Lautver anderungen in der Individualsprache einer Mundart. *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu G ottingen* 11:195-214.
- Labov, William. 1989. The child as linguistic historian. *Language variation and change* 1:85-97.
- Nahkola, Kari and Marja Saanilahti. 2004. Mapping language changes in real time: A panel study on Finnish. *Language variation and change* 16:75-92.
- Sankoff, Gillian, H el ene Blondeau, and Anne Charity. 2001. Individual roles in a real-time change: Montreal (r→R) 1947-1995. *Etudes & travaux* 4:141-157.
- Tillery, Jan and Guy Bailey. 2003. Approaches to real time in dialectology and sociolinguistics. *World Englishes* 22:351-365.