Adult linguistic stability and the gathering of linguistic evidence

David Bowie
University of Central Florida

How stable are the linguistic systems of adults?
What are the ramifications of any instability for linguistics as an evidence-based enterprise?

Methodological assumptions
The validity of evidence gathered in linguistic studies is dependent on the satisfaction of a number of methodological assumptions. In many cases, if these assumptions are violated, the evidence that is collected is obviously inappropriate for the purpose it was ostensibly gathered for. For example, grammaticality judgments about German must come from the rules used by native speakers of German, not French. Similarly, sociolinguistic studies of Southern American English must use evidence gathered from speakers of Southern American, not Irish, English. Other assumptions, however, are more subtle.

The assumption of adult linguistic stability
For several decades, sociolinguistic researchers have used apparent time as a convenient, quick, and inexpensive stand-in for real-time longitudinal studies. However, as some have pointed out, the apparent time construct rests on certain incompletely tested assumptions. One of these is the assumption that, absent major pressure on the linguistic system (from trauma to the speech centers of the brain, vocal tract pathology, constant exposure to a second language, or such), the vernacular linguistic production of individuals remains essentially stable throughout their adult lives.

Testing the assumption
To test the assumption of adult linguistic stability, I conducted two related studies in Waldorf, a medium-sized city (population 55,491) in Southern Maryland. The first extends my earlier apparent-time analysis of Waldorf /ai/-monophthongization by adding data from an oral history archive and the LAMAS survey, allowing a comparison between the effects of speaker year of birth and year of data collection. The second involves an analysis of two rounds of interviews conducted about a year and a half apart with three Waldorf natives, allowing individual intraspeaker differences to be analyzed.

The site of the studies

The /ai/-monophthongization study comes from:
- My 2001 apparent-time analysis
- 25 speakers born between 1909 and 1980
- Data collected in the late 1990s
- Southern Maryland Studies Center oral histories
- 9 speakers born between 1898 and 1912
- Data collected in the late 1960s and early 1970s
- LAMAS survey data
- 5 speakers born between 1857 and 1901
- Data collected in the 1930s

The /ai/-monophthongization in apparent time

A logistic regression analysis finds that real time has a strong effect separate from apparent time

So what?
This has ramifications for all subfields of linguistics that use data from speakers—how can a researcher know that any linguistic behavior being observed (even, say, the grammatical intuition of a given native speaker of a language) is actually reliably representative of that individual’s overall behavior? At this point, we can’t. What we need to do is investigate the parameters within which any given individual’s linguistic behavior can vary (including an investigation of whether linguistic behaviors are normally distributed). This will allow us to draw stronger generalizations from stronger evidence.

Handouts

Selected references and acknowledgements
I would like to thank the Southern Maryland Studies Center at the College of Southern Maryland in Laurel, Maryland for allowing me to use their oral history archive for part of this study.

Selected intraspeaker variation

Long-a word-finally vs. word-internally
- Helen and Theona are consistent
- Elise merged them in 1998 only
- Raising of /au/ before voiceless obstruents
- Helen produced the raised variant in 1997 only
- The pen pin merger
- Helen makes a distinction consistently
- Elise merged them in 1998 only

Raising and fronting of short-a before nasals
- Helen raised and fronted consistently
- Put succinctly, speakers are inconsistent

Intraspeaker vowel class variation

Data for the study of intraspeaker variation comes from:
- 3 speakers interviewed as part of a larger study
- Theona, Elise, and Helen (all pseudonyms)
- Born (respectively) 1919, 1949, and 1918
- Interviewed in 1991, re-interviewed in 1998
- Interviews occurred just under 1½ years apart
- Nobody involved knew they were re-interviews
- Data taken from first to 15 minutes
- Made up entirely of chatting and gossip
- All stressed vowels analyzed

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