

REVIEWS

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Christina Sanchez-Stockhammer (ed.), *Can we predict linguistic change?* (Studies in Variation, Contacts and Change in English 16). 2015. www.helsinki.fi/varieng/series/volumes/16/ (2 March 2017)

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This collection of articles is available online and open-access, in the peer-reviewed eSeries published by Helsinki University's Research Unit for the Study of Variation, Contacts and Change in English (VARIENG), an internationally renowned team of scholars appointed as a 'Centre of Excellence' by the Academy of Finland. The mode of publication enables hypertext and multimedia features, audio and media streaming, interactive graphics, and links with raw data collections. Fifteen earlier collections and one more recent one (I hesitate to call them 'volumes'), predominantly but not exclusively edited by Finnish and Scandinavian scholars, cover a range of topics from the domain of English linguistics. The present collection, number 16 in the series and derived from a workshop held at the 2014 Third ISLE conference at the University of Zurich, unites six papers by internationally renowned linguists, together with an introduction by the editor. Its explicit goal is to reverse the perspective of traditional studies of language change, namely to ask whether our familiarity with past stages of the English language and principles of variability and change allow us to predict future changes rather than merely explain the ones observed in past periods – an ambitious aim.

Christina Sanchez-Stockhammer's contribution 'Can we predict linguistic change? An introduction' sets the scene by outlining the core research question which motivates the collection and some of its important parameters. Two sections in this paper are very clearly structured – one offers a long list of brief summaries of earlier publications which ventured to predict specific structural properties or general trajectories of change of English in the future, and the other one summarizes the contributions to this collection. In addition, a wide range of topics and problem domains are briefly addressed. Predictions of future developments are stated to be difficult in principle for a number of reasons – the irrational and random character of some changes, the lack of hindsight as an explanatory aid, the unclear effects of cultural changes, the media, or politics, and the ever-present possibility of sudden disruptive events which may change evolutionary directions radically. Even explanations of the past and the present state are identified as problematic, however, since they suffer from Labov's 'bad data' problem and may have been guided by a researcher's familiarity with the outcome of a process of change for which explanations are sought. Some principles of linguistic changes, largely familiar from earlier studies, are discussed, such as the nature of the S-curve pattern of change, the needed parameters of a theory of change discussed

in the well-known seminal 1968 paper by Weinreich, Labov & Herzog, the value of the ‘uniformitarian principle’, the origins of innovations, and limitations on possible changes. Physiological and cognitive limitations are found to render certain changes more or less likely; and consequently, the question of whether probabilistic predictions are valuable or not is discussed extensively. The paper touches on a number of relevant and interesting facets of its topic, partly in a somewhat disorderly fashion – which is to some extent due to the complexity of the topic. The author reaches a slightly skeptical conclusion, assuming that some directions of change can probably be extrapolated into the future but the sudden future occurrence of disruptive factors can also never be excluded, so that the prediction of changes is only possible with major problems and limitations.

The following two papers address fundamental theoretical issues concerning the predictability of change (the explanatory potential of the S-curve model and the role of regional and age-based variation), while the other four look into specific case studies (the reinstatement of word-final schwa, the possible disappearance of the mandative subjunctive, word order patterns with non-locative fronted adjective phrases, and the possible impact of lingua franca English on native speech).

Terttu Nevalainen’s paper ‘Descriptive adequacy of the S-curve model in diachronic studies of language change’ puts a core concept of the theory of language variation and change, the S-curve diffusion model, to the test. She looks at the patterns of change of fourteen longitudinal processes investigated in the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence*. While she finds the model to be effective in the majority of instances (twelve out of fourteen features studied), she identifies some degree of variability (e.g. in terms of time-depth and completeness of the change processes) and discusses important exceptions, notably a pattern in which changes can be reversed (e.g. the use of affirmative *do* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and, viewed as a variant of the latter, a U-shaped pattern in which a form that once lost in frequency starts gaining ground again. Interestingly, in a methodologically oriented chapter the author shows that the level of granularity a researcher decides upon also has a substantial impact on the outcome of an investigation and the adequacy of the S-curve. Factoring in more finely grained social groups, varying periodizations and individual lifespan developments produces widely varying results which mostly can be summarily mapped to yield an S-curve. In sum, then, she finds ‘real-time S-curves’ to be basically descriptively adequate and ‘an important heuristic’ against which more finely grained patterns of variation can be mapped.

Sali Tagliamonte’s paper ‘Exploring the architecture of variable systems to predict language change’ also starts out with an extensive discussion and illustrations of the S-curve model, including the effect that rates of change have been found to be always constant. Taking this as a basis she sets out to employ the quantitative techniques offered by variationist sociolinguistics to identify trajectories of change with the goal of prediction in mind. Based on longitudinal and apparent-time data from ten fieldwork sites in the UK, communities which vary in their peripherality and participation in

mainstream developments, she compares the progress of three different grammatical changes – the expressions *have*, *have got* or *got* for stative possession; *will vs going to* as markers of future temporal reference; and the new quotative *be like*. In all cases she identifies regional distributions of old and incoming forms which reflect stages of the progression of innovations as well as systematic age distributions (with new forms occurring more frequently amongst younger cohorts). In addition, she compares the strengths of contextual structural constraints and finds these effects also to be constant. With synchronic distributions thus taken to mirror diachronic processes, she predicts observed processes of change to spread further in the future. Hence, her overall assessment of the central research question is predominantly positive: if the trajectory and the properties of an ongoing change have been identified in sufficient detail, its further course can indeed be predicted to some extent. There is a caveat, however: changes can be reversed or alter their direction due to specific external sociopolitical or cultural causes.

Donka Minkova's contribution identifies another type of change on the basis of a specific example, 'A U-turn and its consequences for the history of final schwa in English'. With data reported extending from Old English to the present day, and several turns of the directionality of the change shown, the paper can essentially be seen as a warning against too shortsighted predictions of change. Final unstressed schwa was ubiquitous in Old English, got lost during late Middle English (with some exceptions documented and discussed) and then became reinstalled in late Modern English, with this process governed by various contextual constraints whose effects have not fully stabilized. It is argued that a late fourteenth-century 'prediction' would have attributed 'no future' to final schwa – but such a prediction would have been utterly false. The paper looks into the conditions which affected steps of change at different periods of time in great detail. Both internal (e.g. association with nouns; a specific prosodic contour; association with onomastic items; systemic phonological relationships) and external factors (e.g. association of final schwa with 'foreign-ness' and learned registers at later stages) played a role in these processes. In modern times final schwa has been assigned a new role, that of marking female first names (as in *Alexandra*, *Chiara*). Overall, both loan phonology and system-internal processes have affected final schwa in different ways throughout the history of English in various and largely unpredictable ways. The author concludes that phonologically this represents a case of a completed turnaround-type of change, while functionally innovative properties have been associated with this form, suggesting that changes are not unidirectional or linear, and hence hard to predict.

In 'For whom the bell tolls, or: Why we predicted the death of the mandative subjunctive', Tanja Rütten also casts doubt on possibilities of predicting change. Her core argument is the fact that varying methodological decisions, contextual conditions and precise definitions of concepts have quite some impact on findings concerning trajectories and rates of change, and hence different settings along these fundamental lines might lead to different predictions. Her example, thoroughly documented, is the

mandative subjunctive, a structure whose disappearance has been predicted repeatedly but which nevertheless seems alive and sound today. The parameters whose impact she investigates more closely are the set of formal alternatives for the subjunctive, the inventory of expressions which trigger it, and developments in the specific context of independent clauses. Concerning the first factor, she finds that during Early Modern English a decline of the subjunctive is not compensated by higher frequencies of what is considered its functional alternative, periphrasis with *should* (which also keeps losing ground), but rather by stronger proportions of infinitives and nominalizations – constructions not conventionally considered in this context. In other words, she suggests that both the putative demise and the revival of the mandative subjunctive might be ‘phantom changes’, caused only indirectly by higher-order syntactic changes (e.g. of verb complement patterns, or the demise of *should*). Secondly, Rütten shows that the set of triggers of mandative subjunctives is strongly period-specific, getting substantially reduced from Old English to Modern English, and the range of the ones considered in individual studies also varies greatly – so that it is by no means clear that the databases on which our descriptions of the phenomenon are based are reliable and sufficiently exhaustive. Finally, it is shown that ‘hortative’ functions of subjunctives in independent clauses occur comparatively frequently, so that the conventional procedure of studying the phenomenon in dependent clauses only also misrepresents its overall frequency and contextual conditions. Taken together, these arguments and observations result in a substantial reassessment of earlier descriptions of the history of the subjunctive, and imply that as linguists we should not overestimate our power to predict or even systematically explain ongoing changes.

The study by Heidrun Dorgeloh & Gero Kunter is about ‘Modeling adjective phrase inversion as an instance of functional specialization in non-locative inversion’. They document the development of constructions of the type *Most interesting is ...* over the last 200 years, assuming that they are crucially determined by semantic and discourse-pragmatic functions of the left periphery of main clauses, namely its roles as connective devices or expressions of subjectivism. Using data from COHA, the *Corpus of Historical American English*, which represents a 200-year span, and employing statistical machinery, the authors set out to test this ‘prediction’ (which, in my view, would be better classified as a ‘hypothesis’, since it does not relate to the future). It is shown that inverted adjective phrases with a connective function increase over time, while subjective expressions decrease substantially. As to the potential for prediction, the authors emphasize the fact that the choice of a ‘suitable scale of classification’ crucially influences results, i.e. an analysis which fails to distinguish relevant subcategories of any phenomenon is in danger of missing important developmental factors. (In the references section it might be worth identifying *English Language and Linguistics*, with a relevant article by Benedikt Szmrecsanyi, as a Korean journal, to prevent futile searches in the publication outlet of this review.)

The last paper, ‘Will English as a lingua franca impact on native English?’ by Ian MacKenzie, is quite different in character and topic from the previous ones in that it does not analyze any data or language forms and does not investigate any process of change in the history of English. Similarly, the notion of ‘prediction’ is dealt with in an entirely non-technical fashion, understood as discussions of rather speculative thoughts on the question raised in the paper’s title. The author summarizes a few known facts about English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) usage; then he somewhat surprisingly discusses contact phenomena possibly caused by the Celtic and Scandinavian influences on English up to Old English (all in a rather superficial and haphazard fashion, down to reporting the untenable claim that English could be viewed as a ‘semi-creole’), and finally considers the question of whether elements of ELF and non-native speech are likely to be adopted by native speakers (itself a rather ephemeral possibility, in my view). Two further sections throw in a mix of familiar notions culled from the theories of language change and sociolinguistics (such as accommodation, prestige, acts of identity, networks, differential variation, or crossing) language acquisition (e.g. UG parameters, caregiver speech, bidialectalism, peer group language), and usage-based theorizing (emergentism, probabilistic grammars), all in what appears to me a rather random sequence and without systematic discussions; the text appears to be ‘topic-dropping’ rather than following a recognizable linear sequence of arguments or thoughts. Subsequently the author goes through a list of some features found widely in ELF communications and concedes that in no case are there any signs of them entering native-speaker usage on a systematic basis. Hence the ultimate answer to the question asked in the paper’s title is negative.

Clearly, this is an interesting collection with mostly (except for the last one, in my view) high-quality contributions on aspects of the history of English. The five papers which investigate specific processes of change in the history of English are strongly empirically grounded – three of them (Nevalainen, Rütten and Dorgeloh & Kunter) analyze large electronic corpora; one (Tagliamonte) builds on extensive sociolinguistic fieldwork data; and one (Minkova) pulls together rich documentation from throughout the history of English. All of them document quantitative distributions of variants, and most employ sophisticated statistical analysis techniques. In terms of periods, the entire history of English is covered: Nevalainen focuses on Early Modern English; Tagliamonte studies ongoing and recent changes; Dorgeloh & Kunter look into the last two centuries; Rütten and Minkova consider long-term processes, stretching in part from Old English to the present day.

I am less convinced that the hypertext options have been employed systematically. Authors’ names are linked to their homepages, and throughout the body of text references link to the respective entry in the references section – features which are nice but not spectacular. In Tagliamonte’s paper maps can be enlarged, and in the introduction lines and dots in two graphs flow rather than being represented statically – that’s about all the electronic gimmicks which can be found; there is no multimedia content, no link to raw data or to other analytic resources. I suppose before online publications really

come up to their full potential we as linguists need to get more used to and familiar with the new options available; there is clearly room for development here.

The topic of the collection itself, the predictability of linguistic changes, is interesting and ambitious, obviously, but also problematic to deal with, as most contributions imply. MacKenzie's contribution offers very global speculation, which is not the same as prediction. Nevalainen's paper, while systematically addressing an important theoretical model in the investigation of variation and change, does not consider the notion of predicting future change at all. Minkova's focus is very strongly on details of the change reported in different periods of time – with a very generic lesson on change to be learned, namely that predictability is always constrained by the possibility of reversal. Rütten and Dorgeloh & Kunter explicitly focus on the issue of predictability, and both papers reach a similar conclusion, namely that prediction is very strongly dependent on fairly detailed methodological decisions and contextual conditions – and both also clearly imply that this is very difficult to achieve and predictions which have been made, lacking such precision, have turned out to be mistaken. Tagliamonte addresses the issue of the predictability of ongoing changes most directly, and reaches a moderately positive conclusion – namely that the next few steps of an ongoing change whose trajectory and constraints are known fairly accurately can be projected, assuming that no catastrophic external event intervenes. Hence, the editor's tentative conclusion at the end of her introduction, which highlights problems and uncertainty more than a potential for success in predicting, seems justified.

For a workshop and a volume, this is a courageous topic to tackle. Readers will not get a response to the core question, but they will come across a few promising steps towards an answer and will receive a number of inspiring thoughts and considerations.

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