On the emergence of new speakers and diversifying variationist sociolinguistics

While variationist sociolinguistics has advanced rapidly since Labov (1966), it remains the case that the search for a socially informed theory of language change continues to be influenced by only very few languages, typically English and a handful other dominant European languages (e.g. Nagy and Meyerhoff 2008, Stanford 2016). Although this picture is slowly changing, such observations hamper the development of a generalisable, cross-linguistic sociolinguistic theory.

In response to Stanford (2016)’s ‘call for more diverse sources of data […] in non-English contexts’, this paper considers recent work on new speakers in regional or minority-language contexts, and what they might have to offer variationist theory. Although definitions can vary, it has become convention to describe new speakers as individuals ‘with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual education programs, revitalization projects or as adult language learners’ (O’Rourke et al. 2015: 1). There is now a wealth of literature available on new speakers in typologically dissimilar language contexts, though, so far, very few studies have adopted the variationist paradigm. Instead, the bulk of new-speaker research is qualitative in nature, and focuses on interaction-level analysis, with ideological themes oscillating around sociolinguistic authenticity in endangered-language communities, legitimacy of new speakers and power relations with other speaker types. That said, some studies have also recognised that the speech of new speakers can be far removed from community norms, or at least perceived as such (e.g. Hornsby 2013). Although few of these studies are devoted to quantitative methods, they can (and, it will be argued, should) appeal to the variationist paradigm, which, for fifty years now, has sought to understand the social significance of language variation, and the mechanisms that drive linguistic change. These fundamental tenets of the field will carry important implications for contexts of language shift, such as those offered by new-speaker studies.

In this paper I attempt to bridge these two areas of inquiry by asking how new speakers can figure prominently in variationist models of diffusion and change. To answer this question, I explore the classic sociolinguistic factor of social networks. Variationist studies that employ a social network methodology have demonstrated that close-knit ties support highly localised linguistic norms and intercommunity distinctiveness in a unilingual context, whereas weak ties promote susceptibility to processes of levelling and innovation diffusion. These findings are now well-documented in monolingual English-speaking communities (Milroy 1987, Kerswill and Williams 2000). In bi/multilingual communities, social network theory has also been invoked to try to account for processes contributing towards language obsolescence, where loose-knit ties have been argued to bring about language shift (Li and Milroy 1995). However, while only a very small number of studies have attempted to apply this model to account for variation and change in minority variety speech communities in contact with English (Matsumoto 2010), much less attention still has been paid to non-English contexts altogether. This paper undertakes a critical examination of existing studies to bridge new-speaker studies with variationist research.
References:


