Competition in the Linguistic system: 
A Variationist Sociolinguistic perspective

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Variationist Sociolinguistics

• “If the language has to be structured in order to function efficiently, how do people continue to talk while the language changes?”
  – Labov 1972:xv
Variationist Sociolinguistics

• Spoken data; often highly vernacular
• Principle of accountability,
  – To prove ø I could do it,
  – I had to prove that I could do it. (CMK/b)

• Competition, Probabilistic choices,
• The fundamental unit of change is not the rule but the *environmental constraint* within the rule
  – Labov 1982:75
Language Variation & Change

• Competition between variants at all levels of grammar
  – Lexis, phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse-pragmatics
  • Labov, Trudgill, Milroy, Wolfram, Fasold, etc.

  – supper/dinner; ‘vase’ [vez]/[vɔz]; somebody/someone; I say; I says; I don’t know anything/I know nothing; she’s going to be cheeky/she’ll be cheeky; like you know/so you see
Competition & Constraints

• Variation
• Heterogeneity
• Layering
• Alternation
• Optionality

• Constraints
• Weights
• Advantage
• Ranking
Competition & Constraints

• Competition can endure across communities, countries, time and space
• **BUT …** the patterning and weights of the constraints distinguish varieties in ways that expose a deeper understanding of linguistic phenomena
• Adaptive vs. evolutive change
Types of change

• Change from above
  – Adaptive change
  – Occurs with reference to socio-cultural circumstances

• Change from below
  – Evolutive change
  – Occurs with reference to the linguistic system that gives rise to it
Techniques of VSLX

• Descriptive-interpretive strand of modern Linguistics
  – Sankoff 1988: 142-3

• Whenever a choice can be perceived as having been made in the course of linguistic performance … it is difficult to avoid invoking notions and methods of statistical inference
  – Sankoff 1988: 151
Quantitative Methods

1. Statistical significance, which predictors (factors) are statistically significant and which are not

2. Constraint ranking/hierarchy, the relationship among categories within a predictor “the grammar underlying the variation”

3. Relative strength, weights, i.e. which predictor is strong or weak?
Origins of AAVE

✧ African Nova Scotian English, Samaná English
✧ Focus on forms, variation, constraints
✧ Issues of ancestry and origins
✧ Comparative
Variable (-s)
3rd singular

• When she *come* out she *goes* and she *takes* her children. When she’s on vacation well, she *remain* in the home. (SAM/009)
• Now he *make* plenty corn with them ten hands … (ESR/010)
Variable (-s)
3rd plural

- They *speak* the same English. But, you see, the English people *talks* with grammar. (SAM/007)
- When the plums *comes* off it ain't gonna be that broad (NPR/039)
Full NPs

• *Tractors* runs away. (6/245)
• There’s a few *jackdaws* comes out the back. (1/362)
• *Me legs* aches a bit. I got it in me knee joints now. (7/303)
Pronouns

• They *sell* tickets so they know near enough how many’s coming round about. (3/365)

• They *keeps* ‘ee, they *keeps* ‘ee alive, and there’s times when you'm dread to see ‘em go. (5/036)

• ‘Cos they've got about 3 or 4 farms, what they *rents* off, you know. (2/367)
Northern Subject Rule

• When the subject is a noun, adjective, interrogative or relative pronoun, or when the verb and subject are separated by a clause, the verb takes the termination -s in all persons.

  – Lindley Murray 1795:211
Northern Subject Rule

• Interpreted quantitatively –s, expected to be more frequent after a noun phrase than after pronouns.
  – s with nouns > Ø with pronouns

  – The cattle all goes to, to the big markets, these days… they go straight to the slaughter house. (DVN/008)
Constraint Ranking — verbal -s

African ancestry

British ancestry

0.54
0.51
0.52
0.57

0.49 0.49 0.49 0.49

Full NP  Pronoun

SAM NPR GYE GYV TIV BCK CMK WHL CLB
Origins of constraints

• 3rd singular -s absence is found in African American communities, but not in the founder English dialects in Southwest England
  – Wolfram 2000:55
UK Dialects
Early 2001’s

- Dialectal variation
- Linguistic competition
- Constraints
- Language change and regional differences
He understand what I say. (SAM/005)

He reckon that the iceberg was carrying the ship. (DVN/007)
Origins of constraints

• European American pattern
  – a strong subject constraint, -s is favored for noun phrases over pronouns.

• African American Vernacular pattern
  – “relaxation of” the noun phrase constraint
    • Wolfram 2000
Constraint Ranking — verbal -s

Peripheral dialects in North America

South UK

Northern UK

Full NP

Pronoun

0.54
0.51
0.52
0.57
0.59
0.72
1

0.65
0.65
0.72
0.72
0.8

SAM NPR GYE GYV TIV BCK CMK WHL CLB

0.04
0.07
0.05

United States

North Atlantic Ocean
Competition & Constraints

• Constraints can endure across communities, countries, time and space

• **BUT** … weights of the constraints distinguish varieties in ways that expose a deeper understanding of linguistic phenomena

• Adaptive vs. evolutive change
A historical remnant

Variable verbal –s exists in English dialects all over the British Isles and North America

– An older feature of English — The Northern Subject Rule
– Qualitative differences expose transmission vs. diffusion

Lindley Murray
Trans-Atlantic Comparison
2001’s

✧ Samaná English, Devonshire English
✧ Focus on competition, constraints,
✧ Issues of ancestry
    and origins
✧ Comparative/
historical
Variable (*did*)

**Samaná, Dominican Republic: [SAM]**
- I *did like* to eat the sugar. I *used to* like to eat the sugar. (SAM/J)
  - Tagliamonte, 1991

**Somerset, Southwest England: [SMT]**
- It was always what everyone *used to* do when you *did hear* the air-raid sirens. (SMT/d/935)
  - Jones & Tagliamonte, 2003
English origin constraints

Parallel processing
• And she all the time *did love* me. She all the time *did tell* me the medicines was good for the children. (SAM/S/1569)

Adverb position
• You *did ALWAYS keep* a jar cider ‘round the back of the rick. (SMT/m/3967)

Clause Type
• They had some vessel what *did steal* them out. (SAM/S/1788)
Creole Origin Constraints

Stative Anterior effect

1. [–stative, +anterior]
   A barrel of coal, they was pass here. Four and half. Well I did buy at three and a half. (SAM/F/2829)

2. [+stative, -anterior]
   She lived over Greenways, but her daughter did live just out of Wincanton. (SMT/d/1198)

3. [-stative, -anterior]
   Oh you had to make the rick properly otherwise he did fall down. (SMT/c/571)
## Logistic regression— variable (*did*)

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<th>SAMANA</th>
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<td>.85 ↑ 27 222</td>
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<td>.47 ↑ 6 3166</td>
<td>.49 ↑ 7 1019</td>
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Competition, Constraints & Weights

• An entire suite of constraints is preserved across diverse circumstances
• Remarkable constancy in time and space across a different sub-systems of grammar
• BUT ... the relative weighting of the constraints diverges in minor ways
• Evolutive change with minor restructuring
Variable (have got)

• He ‘s got bad-breath; he has smelly feet. (YRK)

• They got a lovely family bible... Thomas has it. (CLB/q)

• We ‘ve got enough money; we got some food. (BCK/t)
UK Varieties 2001’s

- Multiple communities from north to south
- Focus on constraints, language change and regional differences geographic diffusion
Trajectory of change

have $\rightarrow$ ‘v/’s $\rightarrow$ ‘v/’s got $\rightarrow$ got
Competition

% have

have got (+ 've/’s got)

NORTH

SOUTH

BCK  CLB  PVC  MPT  WHL  YRK  TIV  WIN  HEN
Predictors for *have got*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF COMPLEMENT</th>
<th>TYPE OF SUBJECT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>✔   Pronoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>✗   NP</td>
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</table>
Type of Subject

Pronouns:
- *I've got* a phone number. (CMK/!)
- *You’ve got* Scotch blood in you. (MPT/@)

Noun phrases:
- *The turbines has* a habit o sticking sometimes. (PVG/g)
- *Every area has* different words for things. (PVG/d)
Type of complement

Abstract:
• You *have* these *memories* lass. (CMK/q)
• I’ve a *notion* to go to the trip. (CLB/k)

Concrete:
• She *has got* near *two thousand pound* with her. (CLB/b)
• They’ve *got* a very big *boat*, like. (PVG/c)
## Relative weight

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<th></th>
<th>NI</th>
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<th>BCK</th>
<th>YRK</th>
<th>MPT</th>
<th>WHL</th>
<th>SSX</th>
<th>DVN</th>
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<td>.52</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.92</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Proportion</strong></td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>92%</td>
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<td>.41</td>
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Robust competition

Dominance of new variant
Competition, Constraints & Weights

• Diversity of constraint effects and varying weights across communities
• The evolution of the linguistic system is visible in shifting patterns
• Regional diversity reflects change
• Synchrony mirrors diachrony
Summing up …

• Competition, constraints and weights galore!
• Linguistic data are probabilistic with variegated complex architectures
• Competition is systematically constrained from multiple sources
Summing up ...

• Varying constraints and weights can distinguish dialects, varieties, origins, trajectories of change and types of change, etc.
Summing up ...

• The evolution of the linguistic system can be viewed in competition

• Competition, constraints and weights taken together offer important evidence for interpreting and explaining language
Questions

• What is the full inventory of evidence from competition, constraints and weights in the literature?
• What do the constraints mean?
• Where do they come from?
• *Causation remains mysterious*
Selected References


