

Who turns language variation into language change?

Cesko Voeten

*Leiden University Center for Linguistics & Leiden Institute for Brain and Cognition
Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
c.c.voeten@hum.leidenuniv.nl*

Ever since [1], sociolinguists have been fascinated by the five major problems of language change. One problem that has thus far not received too much attention is the *transmission* of linguistic change from one individual A to another individual B. What factors determine whether B will ‘pick up’ the language change from A?

I provide insight into this question by means of a large-scale study (108 participants) of an on-going language change in Dutch, viz. the diphthongization of /e:,ø:,o:/. These vowels have become diphthongs in Netherlandic Dutch, but not in Flemish Dutch (e.g. [2]). I compare speech production and perception in three groups of subjects: 45 Netherlandic Dutch participants in Leiden, 45 Flemish Dutch participants in Ghent, and 18 Flemish participants who have lived in the Netherlands for a long time (years—decades). This third group (henceforth referred to as ‘hybrid’) is representative of language change: a Flamand immersed in Netherlandic Dutch is exactly parallel to a Netherlandic Dutch speaker from a hundred years ago (cf. [3]).

Both the production and perception data show significant differences between the Netherlandic and Flemish groups, and that the hybrid group has, as a whole, moved closer towards the Netherlandic group. The production task also shows sociolinguistically meaningful individual differences: a 2-means cluster analysis on the random slopes of a naïve mixed-effects model shows that 6 of the 18 participants are classified as Netherlandic speakers, an effect which is larger than chance ($p < .01$).

What sets these 6 participants apart from the other 12? A principal components analysis reveals three major factors, of which one (which I term *sociability*) is significantly associated with the on-going language change. I discuss the implications of this finding, and synthesize the implications for empirical sociolinguistics.

References

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