Intensifiers in Tyneside: Longitudinal Development and New Trends

Kate Barnfield & Isabelle Buchstaller (Newcastle University)

We report on longitudinal changes in the system of intensification (really, very, dead,…), based on an innovative corpus, the Diachronic Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English (DECTE). This dataset, which was recorded in the late 1960s, in 1994/5 and in 2007/8, allows, for the first time in a British context, real time analysis that spans 5 decades. Rigorous quantitative analysis of 731 intensifier tokens produced by 48 speakers (balanced by age, gender and class) allows us to trace the diachronic development in the variable, which is both “rapid and varied” (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003). Our analyses, which take into account real time as well as apparent time perspectives, answer three main research questions:

(1) What effect do extralinguistic and intralinguistic variables have on intensification in Tyneside data that span three generations?
(2) To what extent has the system of intensification in Tyneside changed across time and does real time data corroborate trends reported from apparent time analyses?
(3) Do Tyneside speakers follow trends reported elsewhere (indication of ongoing globalization or supralocalisation)?

Our longitudinal data show that long-term competition within the variable manifests itself in three types of change that can be traced across time and constraint hierarchies:

• steady long-term replacement of one variant for another (really for very), in terms of frequency within the variable but also in terms of distribution across different types of adjectival heads (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003).
• short term changes showing up as probabilistic waves across diachrony and constraint hierarchies, i.e. dead (Buchstaller 2006, Rickford et al. 2007).
• constant expansion within the variable that is not at the expense of any particular variant, i.e. so.

Our study also corroborates findings reported from other discourse variables, namely that we cannot assume that pragmatic functions are stable across generations and time (Macaulay 1991).

References