

“It’s not that big (of) a deal”: a change in progress in the syntactic variation of post-adjectival degree constructions

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This study describes a current change in progress involving a previously unstudied syntactic variable: post-adjectival (of) in degree constructions such as “It’s not that big (of) a deal”. An initial corpus search of news media from the 1940s onwards revealed a steady increase in (of) usage. The majority of studies in sociolinguistic variation have investigated phonological variables, such as (ing) alveolarization (Fischer 1958, Labov 2006, Hazen 2008) and reduction or deletion of (t/d) (Guy 1996, Roberts 1997). Studies on syntactic variation often examine multiple realizations of a variable (Lucas, et al 2001) or the distribution of several variables (Alim 2001). Rickford, et al’s (1995) investigation of “as far as” constructions with the variable presence of “be concerned” and “go” (e.g. “as far as X is concerned/goes”) showed that syntactic variables can also be isolated. We took a similar approach in examining ADJ (of/O) NP constructions.

Analysis of 3600 tokens collected from 150 participants in the Washington, DC, area, acceptability of (of) is negatively correlated with age. The younger participants showed a strong preference for constructions with (of), whereas older informants preferred (O) constructions. Our findings suggest that this feature is part of a change in progress. Ethnicity was also found to be a significant social factor. African-American and Latino speakers under 35 significantly favored (of) constructions compared to older speakers of their own ethnic group. By contrast, Caucasian and Asian-American informants of all ages rated all constructions similarly, whether (of) was present or not. The patterning of post-adjectival (of) is reminiscent of the development of another variable: quotative *be* + *like* (Ferrara and Bell 1995, Dailey-O’Cain 2000).

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