Language change over the lifespan revisited:
Further insights from the “Up” series

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Though recent sociolinguistic research has made great strides in assessing the nature and extent of linguistic change over the lifespan, many questions remain. Are some linguistic levels more labile than others? Is change limited to rates, or is structure affected as well? How are outcomes shaped by the social histories of individual speakers?

To address these questions, we undertook independent panel studies of the speech of participants in the “Up” series (Almond 1964; Apted 1970-2005), a film documentary about the lives of individuals revisited every seven years from the ages of seven to 49. Sankoff (2004) had already found compelling evidence of phonetic change in the speech of two of them, but paucity of data prevented firm conclusions on whether structural change was involved as well. And particulars of their life histories made it difficult to generalize to whole speech communities. Building on her findings, we considered two phonetic (h-dropping; theta-fronting) and two morphosyntactic (complementizer deletion; stative possessive alternation) variables in the speech of 11 individuals with different sociolinguistic profiles. Tokens for each were exhaustively extracted from the films and coded according to factors previously reported to affect variant choice. These were then analyzed independently for each 7-year interval over the entire 42-year period.

Results indicate that while rates of variant use for each of the variables do fluctuate over the lifespan (albeit not necessarily monotonically), underlying constraints conditioning variant choice remain essentially the same, regardless of type of speaker or variable. Together, the findings provide compelling evidence of the stability of language over the lifespan, lending further support to the utility of the apparent time construct (Labov 1963, 1966) in tracking language change. They further highlight the importance of considering not only rates but also conditioning of variant use, as well as stylistic and situational shifting, in assessing the propensity of the linguistic system to change over the lifespan.

References