Transatlantic divergence: The social and linguistic correlates of actually/really variation

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Despite numerous pragmatic studies on actually (Aijmer 1986, Lenk 1998, Clift 2000, Oh 2000, Taglicht 2001, inter alia) and an examination of its path of grammaticalization (Traugott and Dasher 2002), there is still no quantitative study of the social correlates of actually, and no examination of actually in conjunction with all the related adverbials with which it forms a pragmatic system: really, in fact, as a matter of fact and indeed.

In this paper, I tackle these gaps using the Toronto English Archive (Tagliamonte 2006, inter alia) and the York English Corpus (Tagliamonte 1998, inter alia). These corpora permit an apparent time view of, and a comparison between, two relatively Standard varieties of North American and northern British English, respectively. Using the methodology of variationist sociolinguistics, I investigate over 5,000 tokens of actually and its variants. By examining i) the relationships between the variants; ii) linguistic constraints (pragmatic use and sentence polarity); and iii) social correlates (age, sex and education), a clear picture emerges.

First, use of actually is increasing in younger speakers in both regions. Second, the two robust variants, actually and really, are squeezing out the other variants in both regions. However, while specialization (Hopper 1991) based on sentence polarity exists in (and possibly predates the divide between) English in Canada and the UK, the use of actually is divergent in the two regions. In Toronto, actually is progressing rapidly along Traugott and Dasher’s path of grammaticalization, with no social correlates. In York, however, the process of grammaticalization is far less advanced. Instead, actually has become a socially correlated variable for speakers under the age of 70, associated in particular with educated men.

These finding are compelling for several reasons. First, while there is an increase in actually use in both regions, both the magnitude and the trajectory of change differ. Second, in neither locale is the change led by women, as is often the case (e.g., Labov 1990). Finally, this study adds a pragmatic variable to the morphosyntactic variables recently found to be conditioned by polarity (Torres Cacoullos and Walker 2009, Poplack and Dion to appear).

References
Labov, W. 1990. The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change. Language variation and change, 2, 205-254.