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Saliency in language change

This paper will focus on the role of saliency in language change and specifically discuss differences between salient and non-salient features and the implications of this for language change, if any. In addition, the outline of a research project currently under development setting out to investigate the role of saliency in language change using morphosyntactic data from Tyneside English will be presented at the end.

According to Kerswill and Williams, saliency is “a notion which seems to lie at the cusp of language internal, external and extra-linguistic motivation [] which we can provisionally define rather simply as a property of a linguistic item or feature that makes it in some way perceptually and cognitively prominent.” (2002:81). After reviewing studies on saliency and critiquing Trudgill’s detailed definition from 1986, they present their own three-tier model of what contributes to a feature becoming salient.

- 1) the linguistic feature must be undergoing change
- 2) language-internal explanations (e.g. phonological contrast, semantic transparency, syntactic environment)
- 3) extra-linguistic factors (e.g. cognitive, pragmatic, socio-psychological) which are linked with the linguistic feature undergoing change.

(*ibid*: 105)

Kerswill and Williams add that at least one intra-linguistic factor seems a prerequisite for saliency, however, it is the extra-linguistic factors that are “ultimately the cause of saliency” (*ibid*: 105) as these directly influence speaker behaviour.

The paper will approach the topic of saliency and its impact on change from the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics, which allows for the crucial unification of structural, sociolinguistic and psychological aspects of language change needed in the conceptualisation of this complex construct.

Finally, the project to be outlined at the end of the talk considers *saliency* as an explanatory factor in language change and in the process attempts an empirically based definition of this concept which seems to be situated between intra- and extra-linguistic aspects. The project investigates morphosyntactic change across a range of variables in Tyneside English using variationist sociolinguistic methods, building on two pilot studies investigating two variables in a period from the 1960s until the present. The pilot studies found an increased use of Tyneside English morphosyntactic forms, in particular among younger, working class males. The paper will outline progress so far and suggest interviewer-led questionnaires as a means of investigating the saliency of selected morphosyntactic features.

Bibliography

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