

The role of frequency in sociolinguistic perspective

It is widely accepted in grammaticalisation theory/the usage-based model that over time constructions with a high token frequency will tend to become more reduced, morpho-phonologically, than constructions with a lower token frequency (see e.g. Bybee & Scheibman 1999, Birkenfield 2001). The evidence supporting this is convincing, but we note that it is also biased towards standard varieties of the languages studied. Birkenfield's (2001) corpus, for instance, consists of conversations that occurred in a news show. Sometimes the researchers simply do not include information about the socio-geographic background of their subjects, see e.g. Bybee and Scheibman, who just note that their six informants reside in Albuquerque, New Mexico (1999:579). This bias towards the standard and the lack of attention to socio-geographic background is an issue, because in non-standard varieties expressions may acquire particular local significance and 'resonance' (in the sense of Beal 2000:349), and linguistic variants are susceptible to developing into markers of identity (e.g. regional identity, social class identity). When this happens, the correlation between token frequency and reduction may get distorted.

In order to illustrate this, we present some data from a nascent project on Lancashire dialect, which among other sources draws on recordings from the North West Sound Archive (see Hollmann & Siewierska 2006, Siewierska & Hollmann 2006). The non-standard realisation of the definite article — compare the full realisation in (1), to the reduction to a glottal stop in (2), or even zero, as in (3) — is of particular interest, as this has been characterised as “[t]he most stereotypical feature of northern British English dialects, especially those of Yorkshire and Lancashire” (Jones 2002:325).

- (1) ...and then they built *the* school, Townley school. (North West Sound Archive)
- (2) And she were harmless enough during *t'* day you see. (NWSA)
- (3) Well colliers were coming on the bottom (.) erm near *t'* bottom of Ø smallholdings... (NWSA)

We show that grammaticalisation theory/the usage-based model does a good job of accounting for a lot of the definite article reduction data. However, there are some problems as well. The speaker from whom these examples are taken systematically reduces the definite article before *smallholdings* (see (3)), whereas in noun phrases with more frequent nouns such as *school* (see (1)) — or e.g. *park* or *tree* — reduction is significantly less common. This goes against one's expectations on the basis of grammaticalisation theory/the usage-based model, but may be more understandable in the light of the local importance of the type of small-scale farming portrayed by the word *smallholdings*. Here, then, the data seem to echo Coupland's suggestion that “regional pronunciation and local experience have a mutually encouraging, we might say symbiotic, relationship” (1988:27).

Grammaticalisation theory/the usage-based model, we therefore conclude, must be modified in light of findings from non-standard data. And these modifications are far from trivial, as the majority of speakers of any given language do not speak the standard variety — and the majority of languages in the world do not even have a clearly codified standard.

References

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