

Chapter 13

● Transmission Revisited

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THE PROCESS OF TRANSMISSION is crucial to understanding how language is passed on from one person, one generation, one community to the next. Moreover, a focus on transmission, necessarily involving a temporal dimension, links the fields of sociolinguistics and language acquisition. The implicational relationship between language change and variation, established by Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968), has become a cornerstone of sociolinguistic research. Not for nothing is our flagship journal entitled *Language Variation and Change*.

Transmission, defined as “the unbroken sequence of native-language acquisition by children” (Labov 2007, 346), is at the heart of the relationship between variation and acquisition. However, insofar as speakers alter their language beyond early childhood, does the mechanism of transmission become problematic? Considering research on language change both in historical terms and across individual life spans, this chapter focuses on processes of transmission in acquisition, whether in childhood or beyond.

The Temporal Dimension in Language Acquisition: Early Childhood and Beyond

The temporal dimension in language acquisition is fixed by the human life span and constrained by its maturational states. Thus, it makes perfect sense for L1 acquisition research to be concentrated on early childhood, where most of the action is.

In contrast, studies of acquisition in later life have focused on second languages or dialects. In the case of second languages (henceforth L2), a topic that is beyond the scope of this chapter, the process is usually phrased as one of language LEARNING. In the case of second dialects, however, we hear less about learning than about ACCOMMODATION, a term that nicely encompasses the idea that the changes to be made may be only partial. The two situations also tend to differ in their social consequences.

Accommodating to a second dialect seems to imply tinkering with one's "native language," and involves issues of loyalty that do not arise in the "natural" acquisition of one's first ("native") dialect. In 2017, Welsh politician Leanne Wood was castigated in a constituent's email complaining that her "broad Welsh accent . . . leaves Welsh people open to ridicule." Declaring her Welsh loyalty, Ms. Wood replied via Facebook: "I'm not prepared to pretend to be something I'm not . . . if people don't like it, they can stick it" (BBC 2017). Loyalty issues are framed differently in the L2 case. Partial success in L2 acquisition may lead someone with "a foreign accent" to receive the (often unwelcome) response: "Where do you come from?" Partial success in accommodating to a second dialect may instead evoke the response: "Who does she think she is!" (for trying "to pretend to be something she is not," a strategy Ms. Wood deliberately avoided by embracing her Welsh English).

As with L2 acquisition, interspeaker differences occur in the second dialect case (Payne 1976; Chambers 1992; Starks and Bayard 2002). In "tinkering with" one's original grammar, however, elements of an originally acquired dialect may be replaced, resulting in difficulty in keeping the two apart (Trudgill 1986, 32). Tagliamonte and Molfenter note that, for three Canadian children who returned to Canada after six years in the United Kingdom, "even at the furthest reaches of second dialect success, these children, like most transplanted individuals, will always retain 'flavors' of their mixed repertoires" (2007, 673).

Though the research on second dialect acquisition focuses largely on geographically mobile speakers, the processes involved closely resemble those of dialect diffusion. Labov characterized diffusion as contrasting with transmission, regarding diffusion as "a secondary process:"

[The] limitations on diffusion are the result of the fact that most language contact is largely between and among adults. . . . Structural patterns are not as likely to be diffused because adults do not learn and reproduce linguistic forms, rules, and constraints with the accuracy and speed [of] children (Labov 2007, 349).

In contrast, sound changes that are TRANSMITTED, incrementing via successive cohorts of children, are those that can "operate at a higher degree of abstraction than low-level phonetic shifts, involving grammatical conditioning, word boundaries, and the systemic relations that drive chain shifting" (Labov 2007, 348).

How similar is the second dialect case to the path of speakers aging in place, where language change has affected speakers younger than themselves, thereby altering the ambient language of their native communities? This question is addressed in the remainder of the chapter.

The first two sections outline three trajectory types that older speakers have been found to take under conditions of language change in their own communities, and discuss the issues these patterns raise for acquisition. The following section addresses the most vexing question: how to explain retrograde change among older speakers "swimming against the historical current," thus contributing to a long tail in the S-shaped curve of language change. "Long tail" issues are then exemplified by data from the acquisition of negation in Canadian French. In conclusion, I suggest directions for future research.

Three Trajectory Types among Older Speakers

Speakers experiencing language change in their communities may follow one of three trajectories in later life (Sankoff 2019):

1. Staying with what they learned in primary language acquisition
2. Altering their speech in accommodation to, or learning from, the ever-increasing number of speakers coming up behind them who exhibit later stages of the change
3. Reverting to a more conservative pattern, associated with reaching a “mature” or “senior” age grade.

Grounded in a longitudinal corpus of sociolinguistic interviews recorded in Montreal in 1971, 1984, and 1995 (Sankoff 2019), three case studies are reviewed, one illustrating each type. This research provides a window on how two kinds of time—historical time and the time of the life course—relate to each other.

Stability in Earlier-Acquired Patterns

As people age, they may retain the grammars they acquired as children, including the constraints on variability, despite being increasingly surrounded by younger people. In Montreal French, one such case concerns auxiliary selection between *avoir* “have” and *être* “be” with a small set of verbs of motion, state, and change of state. For example, interviews where people recounted moving from one location to another featured variable use with *partir* “to leave”: *on a/est parti* “we left.” In the 120-speaker sample of 1971, people of higher social status and education were more likely to prefer the standard *être* (Sankoff and Thibault 1977). Data from 1984 and 1995 indicated that the community as a whole was undergoing change toward increased use of *être*. However, a panel of the same sixty people between 1971 and 1984 was characterized by stability (Sankoff, Thibault, and Wagner 2004). Though speakers as they aged retained their earlier-acquired pattern, people born later, as educational opportunities increased, exhibited an increased preference for standard *être*.

Older Speakers Participating in Community Change

The phonological change from apical [r] to posterior [ʁ] in Montreal French occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, beginning after World War II (Vinay 1950). Based on a sample of thirty-two speakers from 1971, matched by age, sex, and social class with thirty-two different speakers from 1984, Sankoff and Blondeau (2007) documented rapid change in the community, led by younger speakers. In this case, we discovered many aging speakers who were far from stable. Tracing life span trajectories for thirty-two people recorded in both years, we found that almost all speakers who had been under age 20 in 1971 (i.e., born after 1951) were using posterior [ʁ] virtually categorically by 1984. For those born earlier (older than age 20 in 1971), trajectories were split about equally between stability and participation in the change.

in later life. How is later acquisition integrated into previously acquired grammars? Does new learning supplant what was previously learned? Are linguistic, stylistic, and other constraints differentially weighted at different life stages? Are different modules of the grammar (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax) equally susceptible to modification?

Most guesses about change in an early-acquired language in later life are based on assessing outcomes, not on studies of the processes themselves. Longitudinal studies linking life span to community language change are still too few in number to assess how typical are the processes outlined in the three attested cases just discussed. The next section reviews several studies of the acquisition of competing variants in childhood and early adolescence, examples of Type 2 trajectories early in the life span.

Acquisition in a Stable Bidialectal Community

Children in Buckie, a small town in northern Scotland, are immersed from birth in both the local dialect and standard Scottish English (Smith, Durham, and Fortune 2007). For the phonological “hooose” variable (including words like *house*, *down*, etc.), the vowel nucleus in the local dialect is monophthongal, in contrast with the Scottish English diphthong. The alternation is conditioned stylistically. In contexts of play and routine, twelve girls and twelve boys ages 2–4 replicated their caregivers’ high rates of the monophthong. In contrast, contexts of discipline and of instruction yielded very low rates of the local variant for both caregivers and children (Smith et al. 2007, 75). Nine years later, the children (by then ages 11–13) had maintained the stylistic constraint, approximating adult-to-adult usage with preponderant use of the monophthong to locals, and higher use of the diphthong to outsiders (Smith 2015).

Speech Community Formation among Children

Peer influence in early childhood is documented in the longitudinal study of eleven kindergarten children in a suburb of Grenoble, France (Nardy, Chevrot, and Barbu 2014), examining three stable variables long present in French. In each case in Table 13.1, omission of the final consonant is frequent in spontaneous vernacular speech, whereas the standard language favors its retention.

Arriving in kindergarten at mean age 4.7, the children’s use of standard variants ranged between 10 percent and 57 percent, with individual rates most closely resem-

Table 13.1. Variables in the spoken French of Grenoble kindergartners

Variable	Example	Phonetic alternation
1. Final [t] in est (3rd sg. present of être ‘to be’)	c’est à moi “it’s mine”	[se (t) a mwa]
2. /t/ in word-final cluster	ça va être joli “that’ll be pretty”	[sa va εt(ɾə) ʒoli]
3. Final /l/ in subject clitic	ils sont tombés “they fell”	[i(l) sō to bē]

bling those of their most frequent conversational partners. A year later, the distance between children's rates had almost halved, ranging only between 20 percent and 44 percent: five children's rates had decreased; four had increased; and two were stable (Nardy et al. 2014, 282). As with adult French speakers, children exhibited both variants and had clearly influenced one another in their spontaneous speech production.

Another study, including eight- and twelve-year-old children along with a cohort of four-year-olds, was undertaken in Milton Keynes, a "New Town" some forty-five miles northwest of London. As a planned city, the population increased from about fifty thousand in 1961 to more than 170 thousand in the three subsequent decades (Wikipedia 2017), absorbing in-migrants with different dialects from across the United Kingdom. In research between 1990 and 1994, speech of the four-year-olds was influenced mainly by the various dialects of their parents, but the twelve-year-olds were coalescing into new, shared dialect patterns (Kerswill 1996; Kerswill and Williams 2000).

Another research project, this time in the United States, again found older children assimilating to linguistic patterns of their peers. Johnson (2010) showed that the advance of the low back vowel merger (*cot* ~ *caught*) along the Massachusetts/Rhode Island border was due to the influx of in-migrants from the Boston area, whose ("merged") children made up a sufficiently large proportion of the local school population to create a tipping point for the spread of the merger among their local ("unmerged") middle school peers. Younger local children typically followed their unmerged parents.

In these and other studies reviewed in Sankoff 2018, peer group influence after primary acquisition was crucial in the linguistic trajectories of children between the ages of about 4 and 12. These studies, and the results of the second-dialect literature reviewed earlier indicate that despite decreasing malleability in adolescence and adulthood, continued exposure to new patterns can result in their later acquisition.

Questions about Retrograde Change among Older Speakers

Retrograde change among older speakers raises puzzling questions about acquisition. In the 1971 Montreal study, data from sixteen speakers under age 30 featured no inflectional futures at all in the affirmative. By 1984, when they were between the ages of 28 and 43, only two of them still showed this pattern. What was going on? We can immediately rule out any idea that they had only begun to acquire inflectional future morphology after age 27, since all of them used it categorically in the negative.² As they aged, the fourteen young people had changed a pattern of total complementary distribution (inflectional future in the negative; periphrastic future in the affirmative) to one in which the inflectional future was now permitted in the affirmative.

Early Acquisition, Later Employment: The Retreat of ne in French

Longitudinal research in Tours, France (Ashby 1981, 2001), revealed a steep decline in frequency of the negative particle *ne* between the 1970s and the 1990s. This change has progressed even further in Canada. Of sixty speakers examined in the 1971 data, only fifteen used it even once, with a combined rate of 1.1 percent (N = 4,054 nega-

tive clauses). The other forty-five never used it, in a total estimated at more than ten thousand negative clauses of *ne* (Sankoff and Vincent (1977) 1980, 300, table 14.1).

In 1995, Louise first uses *ne* in discussing a family conflict (2a), but omits *ne* in the subsequent relative clause (2b):

- (2) a. J'ai un frère qui a marié une Anglaise qui **ne** parle **pas** un mot de français.
 "I have a brother who married an English girl who doesn't speak a word of French."
 b. puis j'ai un frère qui a marié une Québécoise invétérée qui Ø veut **pas** parler anglais.
 "and I have a brother who married an inveterate Québécoise who doesn't want to speak English."

— Louise C., 008, age 53, 1995, 59

Example (2a), from 1995, is in fact the only instance of *ne* for Louise in 759 negative sentences across the three decades of her recorded interviews.³ Between age 29 (1971) and age 53 (1995), Louise was not alone in registering a first use of *ne* at a later age. Table 13.2 shows that for forty members of a sixty-speaker panel recorded in both 1971 and 1984, *ne* was categorically absent in 1971. By 1984, only thirty-two panelists used no *ne*. "Frequent users" (seven or more instances of *ne*) numbered five in both years.

As with inflected futures, we find a large group of speakers exhibiting no use of *ne* at age 15 plus, with a reduced number registering the same behavior at age 28 plus.⁴ Once again, it would seem preposterous to interpret these facts as representing late—very late—acquisition. Is *ne* actually acquired earlier? If so, why start using it only much later? Fortunately, data from early childhood acquisition helps to illuminate the issue.

In a longitudinal study of the acquisition of negation, Choi (1986) recorded French children ages 1;9–2;6, including Adele, a French Canadian. At this early stage, the children produced very few utterances beyond two words. *Pas* was the only negator used by any child, with *ne* completely absent. In contrast, Adele's mother used *ne* at a rate of 18.4 percent (N = 49) in speaking to her daughter, probably much more frequently than in adult conversation. In her early thirties in 1983, she can be compared with her thirty-three young Montreal age-mates in our sample. Only ten used *ne* at all, none registering a rate of more than 2 percent. Adele's mother is clearly off the chart.

Table 13.2. Use of *ne* by the 60-speaker panel in 1971 and 1984

Number of cases of <i>ne</i> per speaker	Number of speakers in 1971	Number of speakers in 1984
Zero <i>ne</i>	40 (67%)	32 (53%)
1–4 <i>ne</i>	15 (25%)	23 (39%)
7+ <i>ne</i>	5 (8%)	5 (8%)
Total speakers	60	60

Transcripts of seven recording sessions between Olivier, another Canadian child, and his father, Bruno, provide a more detailed picture of *ne* in parent-child interaction.⁵ At age 1;11, Olivier produced only three two-word negative fragments, *pas* “not” with an adjective (e.g., *pas chaud* “not hot”). The next two sessions yielded four more such fragments along with ten clausal negatives, none containing any use of *ne*. In the fourth session, Olivier (2;9) uttered six more negative sentences, including one avatar with *ne*, given in (3):

- (3) moi n' a pas des autres autos [wə nə pa dɪz ototo]
 me NEG have not some other cars
 “I don’t have any other cars.”

Two sessions over the next year featured 24 negative sentences, with no further use of *ne*, as illustrated in (4), recorded at age three years, six months.

- (4) parce que j'Ø aime pas ça
 because I Ø like not that
 “because I don’t like that”

Example (5) is one of two instances of *ne* among Olivier’s twenty negative clauses in the final recorded session at age four years, one month.

- (5) oui mais pourquoi je ne mets pas mon, mon, mon chapeau d’hiver?
 yes but why I NEG put not my my my hat of winter
 “Yes, but why don’t I wear my, my, my winter hat?”

By age four, Olivier had clearly acquired the productive, grammatical use of *ne* in simple sentential contexts. In the light of Adele’s mother’s 18.4 percent *ne*, it was not surprising that Oliver had by this time received plenty of relevant input from his father, Bruno.

Across the seven recording sessions, *ne* occurred in seventeen of the eighty-six negative clauses Bruno addressed to Olivier, a rate of 19.8 percent. During Olivier’s second and third years, in a pattern reminiscent of Buckie parents, *ne* for Bruno was concentrated in contexts of discipline (sternly) and instruction (patiently), as in (6):

- (6) Bruno: *Tu n’as pas dit bonjour!* “You didn’t say hello!”
 [modeling for Olivier] *Bonjour, Eléna.* “Hello, Elena”
 Olivier: *Bonjour, Eléna.* “Hello, Elena”
 — Olivier, age one year, 11 months

By the time Olivier was four years old, however, his father no longer treated him as a baby. Far from the patient teacher in evidence when Olivier was three, in the last session (Olivier age 4;1) Bruno loses his temper, repeatedly admonishing Olivier: *C’est Ø p(l)us drole!* “It’s not funny anymore.”⁶ The reduction of *ne* in speech to the four-year-old undoubtedly reflects his vernacular use with adults.

How does the evidence from Adele and Olivier help to clarify the sudden appearance of an old-fashioned variant later in the life span? Adults who are able to trot out *ne* occasionally have been exposed to it as young children. There are of course some children who may not encounter it until they go to school and learn to read.

However, middle- or upper-middle-class children, like Olivier and Adele, have probably internalized the basic grammar of *ne* by about age four. In school, they probably discover that most of their peers don't use it. They stash it away for use in writing proper school compositions, where they do better than the other children, and use it in speech only when reaching an age and a status in life when they find it appropriate.

Nardy et al. reported on some children arriving in kindergarten with a higher than average use of Standard French variants. After a year, these children, like those with a lower than average use, converged somewhere in the middle. As in the situations analyzed by Smith et al. in Scotland, Johnson in New England, and many others, peer influence is crucial. There are, of course, individual differences—more, with increasing age—but the peer group, as local representatives of the wider speech community, makes it clear that there are consequences for outliers.

I do not take a position here as to whether variation in *ne* is best encompassed within a single grammar or whether it results from two grammars in competition, though I think the latter is likely. I do believe that once acquired, the grammar of negation that includes the use of *ne* is available for use. Its association with formal education and the written language continues to be felt across the life span, as its use in speech is restricted almost entirely to formal contexts (Sankoff and Vincent (1977) 1980, 302–3).

Conclusion

If stylistic constraints are an important factor in conditioning variation, it is likely that those speech styles appropriate for using particular (formal) variants simply do not often occur for younger speakers. This brings us back to age grading. If seniors indulge in retrograde change as they get older, linguistic features typical of preceding generations of elders will not die with them. Instructing their children and grandchildren, they use them with a higher frequency than in their usual spontaneous interactions with their own peers, providing input that the children incorporate into their grammars, but wait for an appropriate time to deploy. The tail of language change may then be slowed to a crawl (not, I would argue, to a halt). The case of *ne* makes it clear that stylistic variation is an important component of research on life span change. For those who almost never use it, *ne* appears in co-occurrence with other features of Standard French associated with formality, such as the formal second person plural pronoun (*vous, vos, votre*) used to a singular addressee.

Considering transmission as the starting point for incrementation as children leave the primary influence of their parents, Labov and others have produced models yielding an adolescent peak that has been verified in a number of studies in recent years. We now see that in this plastic, early period, there is also language learning taking place that may not be realized in people's active repertoires until many years later.

This chapter has only scratched the surface in suggesting links between language change, with its concomitant variation, and language acquisition. Very little is actually known about language change at all stages across the life span. Current evidence leads me to believe that the door does not slam on the critical period, but that it does

creak shut. If I had any advice to give young researchers about a strategic research site into issues of transmission, I would choose that life stage where lability still gives young people some linguistic maneuverability, just as their social world is opening up.

Notes

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- 1 Citations from the corpus include speaker's pseudonym, identification number, age at time of the recording, date of recording, and line number in the transcription.
- 2 The near complementary distribution of inflectional futures (categorical in the negative and prohibited for many speakers in the affirmative), first discovered by L. Emirkanian and D. Sankoff (1985), has been observed in every study since.
- 3 This rate of 0.13 percent (1/759) is based on clauses negated with *pas* "not" (1/683), *jamais* "never" (0/24), and *rien* "nothing" (0/52).
- 4 The age range of speakers interviewed in both years was 15 to 62 in 1971, thus 28 to 75 in 1984.
- 5 Transcripts from the GNP (Genesee-Nicolaidis-Paradis) Bilingual Corpus were downloaded from the CHILDES database (<http://childes.talkbank.org/access/Biling/GNP.html>, accessed September 24, 2017). Speaking French (with his father) and English (with his mother), Olivier's acquisition followed monolingual norms in each. Studying syntactic acquisition, Paradis and Genesee report that for the three bilingual children in their corpus, "no indications were found of transfer, acceleration, or delay in acquisition. The hypothesis that the grammars are acquired autonomously was supported" (Paradis and Genesee 1996, 1).
- 6 In six repetitions, negative *plus* "no longer" occurs as [py] as distinguished from affirmative *plus* [ply] in Canadian French.

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