

A tale of two mergers: Sociohistorical agencies across the lifespan in language change

A long-standing question in sociolinguistics is whether language users are more likely to contribute to language change at specific points of their life (Labov 2007, Stanford 2015). In the sociohistorical literature, the social embedding of language acquisition is often seen as key to understanding the contributions of children and/or adults to specific changes (DeGraff 2009, Trudgill 2011).

This presentation applies this rationale to the progression of two well-known but still poorly understood changes in Colonial American Spanish: the merger of four medieval fricative sibilants into /s/ (*seseo*) and the merger of lateral /ʎ/ and fricative /j/ into the latter (*yeísmo*). Both changes have been traditionally attributed to simplification effects typical of dialect contact in the early colonies (Granda 1994). However, more recent analyses have noted significant chronological differences in the attestations of each merger (Sanz-Sánchez 2013). Although the literature on these mergers is abundant, we are still lacking an integrated sociohistorical approach that assesses the relative contribution of individuals at different lifespan points as a factor in the actuation of each change.

In this presentation, such an integrated approach will be outlined based on archival data from several colonial corpora (16th–18th century). Overall, the data suggest that *seseo* generalized early via dialectal accommodation among adults followed by acquisition of a merged variety by children as commonly seen in new dialect formation (Trudgill 2004), whereas *yeísmo* spread more progressively via non-catastrophic incrementation (Labov 2001). Contrastive evidence (Spanish loanwords in indigenous texts and archival evidence from New Mexican Spanish) will be enlisted in support of this analysis. This research exemplifies the applicability of historical sociolinguistic models that incorporate the role of life-long changes in human cognition to the study of the emergence of new language varieties.

References

- DeGraff, Michel 2009. Language acquisition in creolization and, thus, language change: Some Cartesian-Uniformitarian boundary conditions. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 4: 888–971.
- Granda, Germán de 1994. *Español de América, español de África y hablas criollas hispánicas: Cambios, contactos y contextos*. Madrid: Gredos.
- Labov, William 2001. *Principles of Linguistic Change, Volume 2: Social factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Labov, William 2007. Transmission and diffusion. *Language* 83: 344–387.
- Sanz-Sánchez, Israel 2013. Dialect contact as the cause for dialect change: Evidence from a phonemic merger in colonial New Mexican Spanish. *Diachronica* 30: 61–94.
- Stanford, James 2015. Language acquisition and language change. In *The Routledge Handbook of Historical Linguistics*, Claire Bowerman and Bethwyn Evans (eds.). London: Routledge, 466–483.

Trudgill, Peter 2004. *New-Dialect Formation: The Inevitability of Colonial Englishes*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Trudgill, Peter 2011. *Sociolinguistic Typology: Social Determinants of Linguistic Complexity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.