Learners and variationist theory: New speakers and new sources of variation

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Workshop description
A recent focus on ‘new speakers’ of minoritized languages in Europe has shaped a novel trajectory of sociolinguistic research that questions naturalized assumptions about what constitutes a ‘competent’ speaker of a language, and promises novel understandings surrounding the plasticity of the grammar in adulthood. Although the notion of ‘new speakers’ is not ‘new’, it has recently been conceived of as an ‘emic’ category (Jaffe 2015) to describe the lived experiences and sociolinguistic realities of individuals who acquire a minority language not through traditional transmission contexts (i.e. home, family), but as adults through language revitalisation initiatives (O’Rourke Pujolar and Ramallo 2015). This largely qualitative body of work has focused on questions surrounding the perceived ‘legitimacy’ and ‘authenticity’ (Woolard 2008) of new speakers in traditional minoritized speech communities. While this work has repeatedly shown these social actors to be perceived of as ‘illegitimate’ speakers of their chosen target language in most cases, there is nonetheless significant variation in the way these individuals mobilize within these new sociolinguistic regimes (cf. Jaffe 1999, 2015, Costa et al. 2018, O’Rourke and Ramallo 2013, Gal 2018, Ó Murchadha and Flynn 2018, Ó Murchadha and Ó hifstreamáin 2018; Sallabank and Marquis 2018, Puigdevall et al. 2018, Ortega et al. 2014, 2015, Urla et al. 2018).

However, a heavily understudied dimension to the research on ‘new speakers’ concerns their linguistic systems, especially the means by which they exploit their linguistic repertoires and the various linguistic resources that they deploy to navigate the sociolinguistic field. Yet, this is beginning to change. Variationist sociolinguistic work on ‘new speakers’ has shown that newly enregistered varieties of minoritized languages may be emerging within new speaker communities (Nance 2015, 2018, Nance et al. 2016), the implication being that new speakers can operate as agents of change in the diffusion of new variants into their communities, even in cases of severe language endangerment (Kasstan 2017; Kasstan and Müller 2018). This variation, in turn, can also represent a linguistic manifestation of ‘new speakerness’ (cf. Nance et al. 2016, Kennard 2018). Researchers have also begun to focus on the role that language and dialect contact plays in new speaker practices, raising questions concerning the nature of code-switching and vernacularisation of standard norms (Lantto 2014, 2018a, 2018b) or the role that linguistic ideologies play in shaping mechanisms of contact-induced processes among learners (Rodríguez-Ordóñez 2016, 2018).

The results from this more recent quantitative line of work shows that some of the patterns of language change cannot be explained within the scope of existing (variationist) sociolinguistic theory. For instance, Nance et al. (2016) compared variation in rhoticity among traditional and new speakers of Scottish Gaelic in Edinburgh and Glasgow, where they found that the variability that emerges among new speakers is better explained in terms of a Type III variation model, i.e. a type of variation that accounts for identity construction among L2 speakers, contra traditional speaker types that remain the staple of variationist research.
Similarly, Rodríguez-Ordóñez (2018) examines the social meaning and use of Differential Object Marking in Basque, a contact-induced phenomenon that is highly salient and stigmatized within the Basque community. Her results show that ‘new speakers of Basque’ adopt and diffuse stigmatized variants once they have claimed some level of ‘authority’ and ‘legitimacy’ as Basque speakers, further arguing that salient and stigmatized features are prone to change inviting more nuanced explanations that go beyond Labov’s (1994) principles of change (i.e. ‘change from below’ and ‘change from above’). From a stylistic point of view, Kasstan (2018) examines the variable use of /l/-palatalization in traditional and new speakers of Francoprovençal, and shows that previously obligatory rules can become variable, and that this underspecification renders variants available for social work as dialect icons. As such, Kasstan (2018) argues that new forms of style variation can emerge in situations of severe language endangerment, questioning the notion that language obsolescence necessarily leads to stylistic shrinkage, as is commonly argued in the literature (see e.g. Dorian 1994).

These new advancements in our understanding of the linguistic variation among new speakers calls for more comparative sociolinguistic work (per Stanford 2016) that situates the study of linguistic variation at the center of linguistic inquiry in minoritized contexts. As such, this workshop welcomes contributions that engage with questions pertaining to linguistic variation among new speakers of minoritized languages. In particular, we aim to address the following research questions:

- In what ways can ‘new speaker’ variation be modelled?
- What principles of linguistic diffusion and change stand out in these contexts?
- In what ways are ‘new varieties’ of minoritized languages emerging?
- How and why are new speakers diffusing new vernacular forms in their communities?
- What are the processes by which contact features become part of ‘new speakers’” linguistics systems?
- What aspects of the language are more vulnerable to cross-linguistic influence?
- How do aspects of social meaning interact in contact-induced language change?
- How do contact features become enregistered in minoritized contact situations?
- What kind of stylistic practices do new speakers engage in?
- Why do certain features become enregistered while others don’t?
- How can existing analytical domains such as social networks and communities of practice aid us in understanding the emergence and change of new variants among new speakers?
- What is the role of dialect and language contact in the use of new variants in minoritized contexts?
- What are methodological challenges that arise from studying the variation among ‘new speakers of minoritized languages’?

The current workshop proposal is accompanied by nine abstracts that seek to address the proposed research questions. These original studies, representing a wealth of new research on six minoritized languages (Basque, Scottish Gaelic, Irish, Breton, Francoprovençal, Belarusian and Diné bizaad (Navajo)), allow us to move forward in our theorizations of linguistic variation in minoritized contexts. The workshop welcomes further studies that addresses questions of linguistic variation in minoritized contexts.
References


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