

Rethinking the role of speaker agency

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Most contemporary sociolinguists – indeed, linguists of any stripe – would probably agree that language variation and change phenomena result from a trade-off between language-internal and external, social factors. But a good deal of influential research is carried out close to the poles of the internalist/externalist continuum. On the one hand, theories that foreground internal structural pressures favouring changes in particular directions abound in subfields such as historical linguistics (e.g. Ritt 2004) or language evolution, particularly the computational modelling of the latter (e.g. Christiansen & Kirby 2003). Such models relegate individuals or groups of speakers to the status of little more than passive conduits via which changes spread virally through a population. De Boer (2001), for instance, takes the view that language can be characterised as an emergent, adaptive system which ‘can change itself (or its behaviour) in reaction to its environment in order to optimize certain internal criteria’ (2001: 31). Constant language change is guaranteed, de Boer informs us, by the ‘tug-of-war’ that goes on between the opposing forces of communicative efficiency and communicative effectiveness. The degree to which either speakers or listeners, the second of which de Boer describes as ‘bottlenecks’ in the system, may exercise agency over whether or not changes are initiated, transmitted or adopted does not tend to merit much mention in literature of this type.

On the other hand, approaches to the study of language change that take scant account of the constraints imposed by internal structural properties are comparably problematic. What should we make of position statements like that put forth by Kristiansen & Jørgensen (2005: 287), who argue that ‘only... socio-psychological, subjective factors can constitute the driving force behind [language variation and change] processes’? It is self-evident that we do not have total freedom over our linguistic choices, but it would also be fair to argue that we make full use of those freedoms we do have, a theme explored in detail by Coulmas (2005) and Duranti (2005). Thus, when trying to explain linguistic stasis, variability and change, the balance we must strike between attributing the patterns we observe to internal and external forces is a delicate one. Just how much agency can we ascribe to languages versus language users? How do we distinguish between conscious and unconscious agency? Is agency a collective rather than an individual endowment?

In this paper I consider the applicability of these questions to data emerging from the *Accent and Identity on the Scottish~English Border* (AISEB) project*, in which we explore the relationship between the phonological productions of the inhabitants of four border towns and attitudinal data gathered using a detailed questionnaire and via implicit association testing using a range of perceptual stimuli. The persistence of a robust linguistic boundary between Scotland and England – which has been described as ‘the most tightly-packed bundle of isoglosses in the English-speaking world, effectively turning Scotland into a “dialect island”’ (Aitken 1992: 895) – is puzzling, given several centuries of absence of any physical or political barriers to cross-border mobility, and frequent contact between southern Scots and northern English people. AISEB seeks to uncover local people’s motivations for the preservation of the linguistic border, and considers the impact on language patterns and attitudes of recent changes in the British political landscape. I appraise our findings with reference to a trend towards de-emphasising the roles played by agency and identity in language change processes in some recent sociolinguistic literature (e.g. Labov 2001; Trudgill 2008), and in reaction to claims currently being made by psycholinguists about the automaticity of linguistic convergence/accommodation (e.g. Delvaux & Soquet 2007; Wedel & van Volkinburg, submitted).

* ESRC award no. RES-062-23-0525. See <<http://www.york.ac.uk/res/aiseb/>>.