Workshop 1: Language Change in Real Time

Socially Significant Semantic Variation
On a shift in young people’s use of epistemic adverbs in modern spoken Danish

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Several theoretical and methodological problems face the sociolinguist who wants to study variation involving semantic differences. These have been pointed out and discussed in a range of papers at least since Sankoff (1973). Authors have suggested alternative bases for defining a methodologically more valid approach instead of the usual definition of the linguistic variable which presupposes semantic equivalence between variants. Typically, some form of functional or pragmatic equivalence has been proposed, sometimes with an eye to structural similarities between variants (see, e.g., Lavandera 1978; Dines 1980; Romaine 1984; Hasan 2009 [1989]; Pichler 2010; Terkourafi 2011). Ruqaiya Hasan’s work is by far the most comprehensive approach to dealing with semantic variation (see her collected works, vol. 2: Hasan 2009), but does not seem to have been appreciated by a wider audience, possibly because of its explicit reliance on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004).

In this paper, I review some of the central methodological problems related to the notion of semantic variation and suggest a theory-neutral way of operationalising the semantic variable, allowing for a level of functional categories as well. Secondly, I report on findings from a research project on epistemic adverbials in Danish which supports the notion that semantic variation can be socially significant (and thus do not just reflect categorial, semantic differences). Epistemic adverbials express the degree of knowledge about the propositional content a speaker purports to have; examples from Danish are måske ‘maybe’, nok ‘probably’, helt sikkert ‘surely’, bestemt ‘definitely’. Other functions derived from these meanings pertain to (lack of) commitment, protection of face, intersubjective positioning, etc. (cf. Coates 1987; White 2003), but the epistemic meaning may be considered basic for all of these.

The data for this project form part of the LANCHART corpus on spoken Danish, a corpus formed to enable real time analyses of language change (Gregersen 2009). A nonexhaustive list of 26 epistemic adverbials was compiled on the basis of other studies (especially Mortensen 2010), and they were automatically searched for in a sub-corpus of Copenhagen speech, encompassing interviews with 66 different speakers, most of whom had been recorded twice (once in the 1980s and once in the 2000s). The sub-corpus contains 1,3 mio. words, and a total of 6,555 adverbials were coded for a set of intralinguistic factors, in addition to the extra-linguistic factors of sex, class and age already annotated in the corpus. A mixed-effects model fitted to these data shows a highly significant interaction of informants’ age and the time of recording, such that young people recorded in the 80s had a lower than average use of epistemic adverbials meaning ‘uncertain knowledge’, while youngsters recorded in the 2000s in contrast have a higher than average use. I will discuss possible explanations for this unexpected distribution, drawing parallels to studies of the use of approximators and general extenders (Dines 1980; Prince, Frader & Bosk 1982; Dubois 1992; Overstreet 1999; Cheshire 2007).
Figure 1. Interaction of age and time of recording (solid line: 1980s, dashed line: 2000s) when modeling probability of 'Uncertain meaning' in epistemic adverbials.

References