Sociolinguistic methods have enabled us to compare different language communities and, thus, to focus on types of societies (macro-sociolinguistics). The new approach of real time-studies provides precision with respect to time of change and accordingly speed of change. As this new standard of sociolinguistic research equips us with more solid data, it invites us to discuss methods of improving generalizations of results and thereby deducing more precise hypotheses about forces of linguistic change.

A central aspect when we study forces of change concerns the problem of isolating relevant sources of the changes under study. As far as structural (language internal) driving forces like simplification and complexification are concerned, we need to examine the structural nature of each single variable, and the effect of this force will be specific for the relevant variable. A societal driving force, on the other hand — e.g. the influence from one language community or variety onto another — cannot be specific with respect to linguistic variables as this force is of a different nature and is characterized by e.g. economic and social factors, communication, migration, cultural domination etc., which cannot be theoretically connected to linguistic structure. Therefore — all else being equal — we should expect that external or societal forces exert the same influence on all linguistic variables in the community. Accordingly, it is a contradiction if an external driving force affects only some of the variables and not others.

The point of departure for this way of reasoning is that macro factors are fundamental when we look for explanations, but there can be additional factors. If a variable demonstrates a result (with respect to speed and degree) that deviates from the average of all changes in the variety under study, this deviation must be caused by some additional force or condition. Linguistic structure is such an additional force, which can be argued for independently. Moreover, social values indexed to specific linguistic variables, such as e.g. reallocation and prestige, could hamper or enforce changes. However, this indexed value does also need to be attested by independent empirical data – in order for us to avoid resorting to either ad hoc factors or circular arguments.

My intentions with these suggestions are to strengthen our theoretical restrictions on what we can interpret from sociolinguistic results. In my paper I hope to demonstrate how such restrictions can help to pinpoint the most likely sources of dialect change and to discuss the theoretical content of the restrictions. The discussion will be based on statistical results from several Norwegian real time-studies, and the sources in question will be other Norwegian language varieties, both written standards and spoken varieties being regarded as relevant in the Norwegian context.