

Intra-speaker variation and change

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In the last decade, panel studies have challenged the assumption that individual speakers grammars remain stable after the so-called critical period during adolescence, by showing that a proportion of the speakers do change, often substantially, and not always in the same direction as the community trend (see Sankoff 2006, 2013 for reviews). This obviously questions the commonly used apparent time method of deducing language change by comparing two samples of speakers of different ages at a given point in time. But it also questions the concept of individual speaker stability altogether.

Our paper concerns how individual speakers respond to macro-level processes of language change, assessed through a series of real time studies based on the LANCHART corpus of modern spoken Danish. The variables included are generic and reflexive pronouns (Jensen 2009a, b, Maegaard et al. 2013). The first analysis is based on a panel of 65 speakers who were recorded during sociolinguistic interviews both in the 1980s and in the 2000s, the second analysis on recordings with speakers who were recorded in different situations at approximately the same point in time. The results show not only that life span change is much more common than often assumed, also among adult speakers, but also that variation prevails within a micro-diachronic perspective (between conversations recorded within a few months). The results emphasise that great caution should be exercised when taking a difference between two pieces of attested language use as an indication of a difference in grammar, underscoring the need for taking context into account in a much more fine grained way than has been common in variationist sociolinguistics.