

Deconfounding the effects of competition and attrition on dialect across the lifespan: a panel study investigation of Swabian German

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Abstract

Lifespan dialectal changes in individuals are typically seen as reflecting the attritional effect of standard languages on native dialects. However, particularly relevant to lifespan studies of dialect usage is the observation that the distributional properties of natural languages guarantee that the lexical knowledge of individuals increases continuously throughout their lifetime and that the overwhelming majority of lexical types any individual knows are rare and often unknown by other speakers. These considerations suggest an alternative account of the changes in individual speech patterns across the lifespan: that is, the increased influence of later acquired, usually non-dialect, lexical knowledge on speakers' vocabulary choice, not the "loss" of dialect itself. Consistent with this view, an analysis of the speech of 20 speakers of the southwestern German dialect, Swabian, recorded in 1982 and again in 2017, reveals that rather than "lose" dialect over the course of their lifetime, speakers acquire a vast amount of non-dialectal vocabulary reflecting experiences gained in later life. Within the set of relatively high-frequency words sampled in this study, the least frequent dialect forms, rather than being lost, have become slightly more frequent 35 years later, a finding that supports the enduring role that dialect plays across the lifespan.

Keywords: lexical frequency, lifespan change, language change, ageing, dialect contact, dialect