

## A real world method for historical sociolinguistics

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Many linguists have argued for the value of synchronic dialects and living language materials to provide “an important picture of varying stages in the (recent) development” of a language (Tagliamonte, 2006). This presentation focuses on dialect features that are obsolescing. There is a modest body of research on fading dialect features (e.g. Schilling-Estes & Wolfram, 1999; Jankowski & Tagliamonte, 2017); however, few works have detailed the precise methodology for conducting this type of research nor its benefits.

First, is the inherent value of giving ‘voice’ to rare and dying features because they typically embody cultural identity. Second, documenting the linguistic features in understudied dialects enriches the knowledge base of human languages (Henry, 1995). Third, is that fading dialect features provide insights into the underlying processes of language change. While previous research has reported relatively negative trajectories of loss (e.g. Schilling-Estes & Wolfram, 1999; Jankowski & Tagliamonte, 2017), there is also evidence of novel pathways of innovation (Rupp & Tagliamonte, to appear). These findings put a positive ‘spin’ on the possible directions of change in a global situation of severe language loss and highlights how timely this work is for current scholarship.

How can analysts discover and study rare features before they are lost to future generations? Building on a foundation of linguistic theory, variationist sociolinguistics and dialectology, we outline a collaborative research program in which we have developed a step-by-step methodology for studying language features on the verge of demise: from identifying to documenting to analyzing them. To begin with, what does it take to recognize a dying feature and where does one look? A first step involves anthropological observation, community-based fieldwork or searching on-line data bases, dictionaries and other sources. In a contemporary community, seek out older male speakers in blue collar jobs and compare them to the younger speakers. At the same time, legacy recordings may exist that can significantly augment the synchronic perspective. Once an obsolescing feature has been observed, data extraction using manual methods is critical since every token matters. In analyzing the feature, a key consideration is how far does the feature go back in time with the same meaning and what is its geographical distribution? Consulting the now readily available compendia of historical data such as the Oxford English Dictionary or the Corpus of Historical American English (Davies, 2010) is essential. Just as important is the old-fashioned method of contacting fellow researchers for evidence in their materials. The advantages of studying small numbers of tokens is being able to conduct detailed discourse-pragmatic analysis; focusing on distributional patterns (instead of complex statistics), and delving deeply into co-existing features.

With these steps of our methodology in mind, we will use for illustration the obsolescing feature of double demonstratives in rural Ontario, Canada (e.g. ... *and all-of-a-sudden **this here fox** was in the window*; Tagliamonte, 2013-2018). In the process we will demonstrate the discovery of patterned variation and underlying systemic developments that offer new explanations for language change.

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