



Dialect accommodation in interaction: Explaining dialect change and stability



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ABSTRACT

The dialect situation in West Sweden is characterized by extensive intra-individual variation. When analyzing this variation, it became evident that speakers accommodate their use of dialect and standard features to their interlocutors. The present paper deals with interpersonal accommodation within a conversation and relates this to the dialect situation in the area studied, in order to discuss the possible relationship between micro-level accommodation and the linguistic situation in a given speech community. The paper goes on to suggest that Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and interactional analysis are important assets to modern sociolinguistic theory as they can help explain variation and, maybe, the processes behind linguistic change and stability.

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1. Introduction

A general notion within socio-dialectology is that contact between two linguistic varieties may lead to language change (e.g., Auer and Hinskens, 1996, 2005; Trudgill, 1986). Change is usually preceded by linguistic variation, and many researchers within this field focus on describing and explaining such variation and change (cf. contributions in Auer et al., 2005; Chambers et al., 2002). This body of research has concluded that dialects tend to level towards standard varieties in much of today's Europe. This is also the case in Sweden: Swedish dialects are changing according to the same pattern found in many other locations in Europe, and are characterized by extensive intra-individual variation, that is, speakers use both standard and dialect variants. When analyzing this variation more closely in data from West Sweden, it turns out that it is partly a result of individuals converging towards each other in conversation.

The focus of this paper is on intra-individual variation and accommodation in interaction. The aim is to investigate, turn-by-turn on the interactional micro-level, how and why speakers shift in their use of dialect and standard variants, as well as how and why they accommodate to their interlocutors. Further, this micro-level accommodation will be linked to the linguistic situation in West Sweden, and the question of whether accommodation in interaction can explain both language change and language stability will be discussed. Even though several studies on dialect change have discussed accommodation (e.g., Giles et al., 1991; Hinskens, 1998; Trudgill, 1986), few have taken an interactional perspective and analyzed how participants in conversation use dialect and standard variants as social actions (cf. Weatherall, 2012). In this paper, this will be done by combining Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) with interactional analysis (see more in Sections 2 and 3).

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The paper begins with an overview of how dialect change and stability may be explained (Section 2). This section includes a brief outline of previous research on dialect change and stability in Europe, with special attention given to the situation in West Sweden, as well as a short introduction to CAT and a model of how accommodation may lead to language change. After describing the data and interactional analysis method used in this paper (Section 3), selected representative examples of accommodation to dialect and standard variants are analyzed and discussed in Section 4. Finally, in Section 5, the results from the interactional analyses are related to the dialect situation in the area investigated in order to discuss whether and how face-to-face accommodation may help to explain dialect change and stability.

2. Explaining dialect change and stability

In the past decades, several studies have concluded that dialects are leveling towards more prestigious standard varieties in many European countries, for example Denmark (Pedersen, 2005), the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Poland, England, Greece and Russia (Auer, 1998, 2005). This is also the case in Sweden, where a significantly smaller proportion of the population speak traditional dialects today compared to the mid 20th century (e.g., Nilsson, 2009; Sundgren, 2002; Svahn and Nilsson, 2014; Thelander, 1979). However, some recent studies have pointed to the fact that there are still quite stable linguistic communities as well. Such stability, or rather a less rapid change, has been reported from the Nordic countries of Finland, Norway, Sweden, and especially Iceland (Friðriksson, 2008; Ivars, 2003; Røyneland, 2005; Sandøy, 2004). This has been explained in terms such as prestige, belonging to the in-group, and a strong sense of local identity (Røyneland, 2005). Other explanations that have been put forward are close-knit social networks and conservative language policies (Friðriksson, 2008).

Both linguistic change and linguistic stability were found in West Sweden by the project Dialect Leveling in West Sweden (Svahn and Nilsson, 2014; see also Section 3 below). The project investigated two traditional dialect areas close to Sweden's second largest city, Gothenburg. The Gothenburg variety is not standard Swedish, but an urban dialect that evolved in the late 19th century within the working class. Today it clearly has some prestige, as it is rapidly gaining ground around Gothenburg. In one location studied by the project, Stenungsund in coastal West Sweden, a dialect shift had taken place: all informants, regardless of age and gender, spoke the Gothenburg variety. In another nearby location, Skärhamn, the project found very traditional dialect speakers, Gothenburg variety speakers and speakers who mixed features from both varieties as well as from standard Swedish (this variety was coined *combilect*). In inland West Sweden, the situation was different. There, the project found that the traditional dialect was being replaced by standard Swedish; in other words, the linguistic situation was characterized by dialect leveling. At the same time, a large part of the traditional dialect system was still in use, and some speakers spoke a traditional local dialect. There was, however, no trace of the Gothenburg variety, even though some of the locations investigated in inland West Sweden are at the same distance from Gothenburg as the coastal locations.

2.1. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

As pointed out by Niedzielski and Giles (1996), language change in a community evolves in one speaker at a time. Therefore, a good place to seek explanations for change and stability in a speech community is at the micro-level and in how single speakers accommodate to their interlocutors in interaction. A theoretical framework for this is offered by CAT. Originally, CAT (previously Speech Accommodation Theory), was developed to investigate shifts in style and accent (Giles, 1973). As CAT has evolved over the years, it has become a complex theoretical framework, the aim of which is to explain how and why speakers adjust their communicative behavior in social encounters, as well as what the consequences of such adjustments are (Dragojevic et al., in press; Soliz and Giles, 2014). Even though CAT is primarily a social psychological theory, parts of it are well suited to being applied in linguistic analyses, especially when seeking to explain how linguistic change starts at the face-to-face micro-level. In this paper I will use some concepts from CAT, together with methods from interactional analyses (see Section 3), to answer the questions of how and why speakers in conversation converge and shift in their use of dialect and standard variants. I will also discuss the consequences of this, that is, of dialect change coexisting with dialect stability (see Section 5).

The most important CAT concept discussed in this paper is the notion of *convergence*. This refers to the act of adjusting one's communicative behavior to be more similar to that of one's interlocutor(s). CAT makes a distinction between *upward* and *downward convergence*, where the former refers to shifts toward a more prestigious variety (often the national standard) and the latter to a less prestigious variety (see for example, Dragojevic et al., in press; Gallois and Giles, 1998; Niedzielski and Giles, 1996). According to CAT, speakers may have *affective motives* (Dragojevic et al., in press) for such convergence, as it can be a way of gaining the social approval of others; thus, the more someone wants to be part of a group, the greater the accommodation (Giles et al., 1991; Giles and Smith, 1979; Thakerar et al., 1982). Accommodation is also a way of expressing a common social identity, and perceived accommodation may even increase the recipients' self-esteem (Gasiorek and Giles, 2013). Experimental studies in CAT have also shown that people in general like their interlocutors better if they adapt to a certain degree (Giles and Smith, 1979). Further, a dialect speaker may identify with local values and this affective motive can be the driving force behind accommodation to other dialect speakers within the community, or for *maintenance* in language contact situations (that is, not converging with speakers of other varieties but maintaining their 'default' variety; see Giles and Gasiorek, 2013). A speaker may also accentuate the differences between their speech and their interlocutors', *divergence* in CAT terminology.

Many previous studies of accommodation in conversation have quantified the level of accommodation over a whole interactional episode (e.g., Coupland, 1980, 1984; Pardo, 2006; Trudgill, 1986; see also Auer and Hinskens, 2005; Giles, 1973).

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