

## Cognitive aspects of leaders and laggards in syntactic change

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The individual is often neglected in the study of language change, with their influence considered “reduced below the level of linguistic significance” (Labov 2012: 265). This view, however, is too narrowly focused on social identity, excludes the influence of individual differences, and leaves important questions unanswerable: Does individual (cognitive) processing impact the spread of a variant at the community level, and if so, how/why? How do individuals accommodate change in their understanding/use of the language? To answer these questions, a detailed study of individual behaviour is necessary.

This paper aims at providing such a detailed study of twenty-nine writers across two generations born around the 1660s and the 1710s respectively. It provides an investigation of changes in their use of the emerging nonfinite and more established finite complement clause (CC) variants with the complement-taking predicates (CTPs) *remember* and *forget*. In the type of variation shown, the newer variants, first attested in the late fourteenth century, coexist with the established variants, complementing the variationist literature on replacement of the older counterpart (e.g. Nevalainen et al. 2011). Existing theory suggests that syntactic change often resides below the level of awareness (Labov 2001:28), making this an ideal case to study the role of cognitive representations and their flux due to the lowered influence of social variables. With this analysis of an unstudied type of syntactic change from a new cognitively informed perspective, we aim to add to Fonteyn & Nini’s (2020:18) usage-based model of individual variation. Further, in studying long-term variation we seek to contribute to a theory of language as a complex adaptive system (Beckner et al. 2009).

Data consist of >500,000 words per individual, annotated for CCs featuring *remember* and *forget*. Each instance is coded on eight functional variables (semantic, structural and discourse). Multifactorial classification models are then employed to determine which language-internal factors an individual uses to condition the variation in their linguistic output, and to compare the relative importance of the constraints across both individuals and generations.

Preliminary results from >1,200 instances show that individuals organise their behaviour more along the lines of smaller, partly idiosyncratic systems than larger semantic groupings, creating substantial degrees of inter-individual variation; we argue this correlates with continued long-term variation. There is evidence for increased importance of functional constraints, e.g. clause meaning, in the later generation. A drop in the degree of idiosyncrasy between the earlier and later generation shows potential standardisation at play. Finally, tentative evidence is found that a minority of individuals predict the next generation’s usage patterns, perhaps marking themselves as ‘way-pavers’. The predictive individuals also show in-group similarities in lifespan usage patterns, implying some possible similarity in their style of processing and accommodating variation. These results already allow for a strong discussion of the impact of interindividual differences in cognitive representations on long-term population-level language change, as we find that long term variation on the generation level is both facilitated and shaped by heterogeneous idiosyncrasies on the individual level.

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