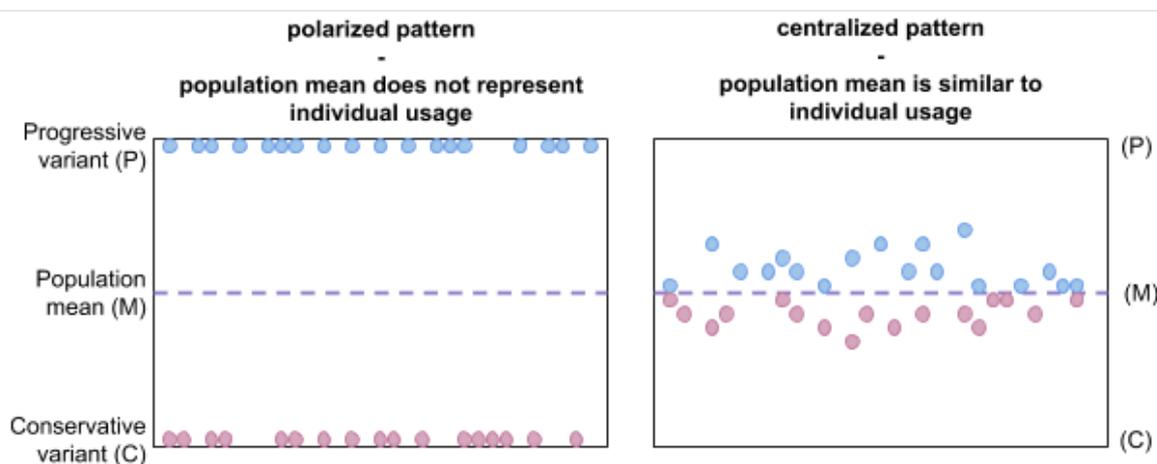


Individuality in syntactic variation: an investigation of the 17th-century gerund alternation

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Symposium on Representations, Usage and Social Embedding in Language Change
University of Manchester, Manchester, UK. August 2019

Despite the longevity of interest in the role individuals play in language change, it appears that historical (corpus) linguistics has predominantly focussed on studying change in the ‘grammar-generated variation’ in aggregated, population-level data. However, in recent years, scholars have been placing more explicit emphasis on the relation between the linguistic behaviour of individuals and the changes we observe in such population-level language (see, among many others, Baxter & Croft 2016; Hundt *et al.* 2017; Petré & Van de Velde 2018; Mackenzie 2019). One notable example is a study by Nevalainen *et al.* (2011), who use real-time historical corpus data from the Early Modern English period to document how individual language users ‘participate’ in different types of morpho-syntactic change. From their study, Nevalainen *et al.* (2011) concluded that, when confronted with the fact there are “different ways to say the same thing” (Labov 1972:188), individual language users are more likely to actually participate in the variability that is observable in population-level language if the process is protracted and involves a change in an abstract structural pattern. In other words, if two variant forms are used at a 50-50 proportion in an aggregate data pool, the behaviour of individuals tends to be more centralized (rather than polarized) when the two variants concern abstract syntactic patterns in competition.



Given such figures, it is tempting to conclude that slow, gradual changes of abstract patterns are essentially changes whereby the behaviour of individual language users aligns with the mean observed in aggregate language. However, such conclusions cannot and should not be drawn, as such figures simply represent how often individuals opt for a progressive or conservative variant, and thus, they do not reveal anything regarding the potential differences in ‘grammatical constraints’ these individuals apply to condition the observed variation.

The aim of this study, then, is to investigate (i) whether individuals who use ‘alternate ways of saying the same thing’ employ shared or idiosyncratic rules to condition that variation, and (ii) at what level of specificity such possible idiosyncrasies emerge. The variation pair under scrutiny is illustrated in (1):

- (1) a. ...*the dishonour of Gods Name should affect us more then [the shedding of the warmest blood in our veins]* (John Flavell, 1668)

b. *he... made an end of...* [*Shedding o the Blood of Rams, Lambs, Heifers, Goats and other Creatures*] (George Fox, 1686)

The structures in (1a)—the nominal gerund [NG]—and (1b)—the verbal gerund [VG]—illustrate two types of *ing*-nominals that were used interchangeably during the Modern English period (see, among many others: Fanego 2004, Nevalainen et al. 2011, De Smet 2013, Fonteyn 2019). The study presents a quantitative analysis of 14,000 NGs and VGs (taken from the *Early Modern Multiloquent Authors* corpus) found in the writings of 19 authors born in three subsequent generations (between 1599 and 1640), all of whom have all been proven to be connected to the same social circles (Petré *et al.* 2019). The data set has been examined by means of two complementary statistical models that have recently been added to the variationist toolkit: Conditional Inference Trees and Random Forests (Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012). Each observation in the data set has been coded for language-internal (e.g. *determiner, function in clause, verb type*) and external factors (e.g. *individual, age, generation, genre*). By homing in on how historical individuals used variable syntactic structures such as the English gerund, this study takes an important step towards documenting “the extent and nature of individual variance for linguistic features at all levels of grammar” (Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012: 24) by means of real-time historical data.

The results of the analysis indicate that individuality is an important predictor of the variation, which trumps the predictive power of some of the proposed language-internal factors as well as the higher-order sociolinguistic factors such as the age or generation of the author. Furthermore, by offering a comparison between author-specific models, we were able to determine that authors do share some ‘constraints’, but none of the models are exactly alike in terms of breadth, depth, and the specific order and importance of predictors. In light of the model of language proposed by usage-based theories, these results can be explained by the fact that different individuals can come across different exemplars, and consequently will build slightly different models of a construction.

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