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Brains versus people in Early Modern English. Syntactic change as a socially embedded emergent phenomenon

Language change has typically been studied at the aggregate level, yet it is individual behaviours that change to bring about such change. Assuming that language is a complex adaptive system (Beckner et al. 2009), I show how macro-properties of grammaticalizing constructions can be accounted for as an *unintended effect* of *intentional* individual interactions. These dynamics are exemplified by various developments in seventeenth and eighteenth-century English as represented in 50 prolific writers (brought together in the EMMA-corpus, Petré et al. 2019), including the grammaticalization of *be going to*, the copularization of 'get', and the increasing productivity of prepositional passives. For each of these types of evidence it will be shown that individuals continue to innovate/adopt innovations beyond adolescence, but do so in different ways, depending on their age and community of practice. These differences lead to a higher degree of variation, which prepares a changing construction for its next leap. Also, leaders of change are followed by both older and younger adopters, but whereas older adopters will conservatively constrain innovative usage in agreement with pre-existing habits, younger language users may significantly elaborate usage across the lifespan (cf. Petré & Van de Velde 2018). Combined, these behaviors reinforce the well-known S-curve propagation of change.

To fully understand the various developments outlined here, the specific English socio-historical context also needs to be taken into account. The writers in EMMA lived in the turbulent seventeenth century, which saw the Civil War, plague and Great Fire of London in rapid succession. Such upheaval appears to impact on the rate of change, with signs of changes slowing down in times of extreme stress. General demographics and social networks with many weak ties (in line with work by Milroy & Milroy 1985, Trudgill 2011, among others) also play a role, with Londoners being generally more progressive.

Yet even within this complex multi-faceted reality, regularities across individuals' cognitive representations emerge, as visible in recurrent intra-individual orderings of adopting interlinked innovations, or frequency correlations between similar constructions. Eventually, the combination of these individual regularities and their unintended macro-effects should also help explain why English grammar diverged so much from other Germanic languages.

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