

IS1306 “New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe: Opportunities and Challenges”

The phonetics & phonology of new speaker varieties across the lifespan
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Event Report

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Aims

Understanding how 'new speakers' produce and perceive their new and existing language(s), and the consequences of this for day-to-day communication and long-term language change, has the potential to provide a novel perspective on fundamental issues in phonetics and phonology. It is not surprising then, that work in this area, in particular sociophonetics, that focuses on the new speaker phenomenon has begun to emerge. Our workshop brought together a small group of researchers in the UK and the Netherlands, working directly on the phonetics & phonology of New Speakers for a one-day meeting. Our aim was twofold. First, to critically review our existing work, and second, to identify common themes and interests which would provide the foundation for collaborative projects.

Themes and Discussions

My interest in New Speaker communities has come about through work with Gisela Tomé Lourido in which we've examined the production and perception of Galician by so-called *neofalantes*, who grow up bilingually in Spanish and Galician, are initially dominant in Spanish, but switch to using Galician mostly, or in some cases exclusively, at a late stage in language development, normally late adolescence for social, cultural or political reasons. This group of speakers, characterized by a late switch in language dominance, have provided us with a unique opportunity to investigate the role of both social and linguistic constraints in language use. It was clear that this aim was one which we all shared, and conversations around the social and linguistic formed the basis of much of our discussion.

It was tempting to think that given this shared aim and the fact that all our studies focus on 'new speakers' who fit the definition of being someone who has learned the language outside the home and who can become active speakers of the language, finding common ground would be straightforward. But it was clear from the outset that whilst we might use the same terminology and illustrate our communities in very similar ways (we were all partial to using beautiful pictures of mountains, sea and farmhouses, of which more later), there were perhaps more differences than similarities.

Galicia (Tomé Lourido & Evans) and Fryslân (Haug Hilton) are both bilingual communities, where the distance between the minority language (Galician, Frisian) and the national majority language (Spanish, Dutch) is relatively small. Most speakers in these communities grow up bilingually in both languages, and coupled with the close relationship between the

different languages, it is not therefore difficult for members of the community to become new speakers. That is, it is relatively straightforward for them to acquire competence in the language (see also O'Rourke & Ramallo, 2011). Indeed, in Fryslân, one could argue that the situation is one of bidialectalism rather than bilingualism. This is likely also the case in Béarn (Mooney), where the local Romance, *langue d'oc* variety, Béarnais, a sub-dialect of Gascon, is closely related to the dominant French language, but where the situation might be characterized as dialect death as a result of language (or dialect) contact. In contrast, the Celtic-origin languages of Bréton (Kennard), Scots Gaelic (Nance) and Welsh (Morris, Mayr) are much more distant from the contact language (French, English), and one could imagine that it is therefore much more challenging for new speakers to acquire a basic competence in the language.

Not surprisingly, the way in which new speakers acquired their language varied across our communities. In Galicia, Fryslân, Wales and Scotland acquisition of the new language was often in childhood and could either be through school or perhaps contact with other family members (e.g., a Grandparent), or both. In Béarn, however, though acquisition for new speakers was often in childhood, it was normally through a network of local schools, Calandreta, where the teachers themselves were New Speakers. New Speakers could also in some cases be more like traditional second language learners, learning the language in adolescence or early adulthood (e.g., for Scots Gaelic), though arguably with different motivations, aims and objectives, whilst in other communities, e.g., Wales, one might argue that some new speakers at least, are more similar to traditional bilinguals. Though most speakers were competent users of the language in both the oral and written domains, this wasn't always the case. For example, for Frisian, some speakers could speak but not write the language. This raises not just practical issues for data collection, but also brings into question the role of literacy in bootstrapping phonological acquisition. Even in Bréton, where it is the older rather than new speakers who do not read or write in the language this can lead to methodological difficulties, e.g., in designing tasks to elicit comparable data from different age groups within the community.

The departure from the traditional family model of bilingualism, often as a result of the gap in transmission in revitalized communities, also led us to consider both practical issues (e.g., in collecting and comparing data from older and younger speakers) and the applicability of traditional theoretical concepts, such as the question of native speaker models (who is the model: traditional community or peer group?) and ultimately, the notion of the speech community itself. We joked about how many of us represent our communities in our talks with pictures of beautiful Atlantic coastline, mountains and rural villages but our discussion of the notion of the speech community led us to consider the notion of authenticity and in some cases to question if we as researchers were complicit in perpetuating a romantic myth of some new speaker communities that is not necessarily representative of reality. For example, Glasgow, a large urban centre with no history as a Gaelic-speaking community, and very different from the Gaelic-speaking heartland in the Outer Hebrides, has recently seen growth in Gaelic-medium education. In such cases, we likely need to provide a more socially sensitive construction of place and community.

Though the notion of the speech community has been problematized in other areas of sociolinguistics, this discussion led us to consider larger questions surrounding difficulties in applying traditional constructs from Language Variation and Change (LVC), in particular apparent time, to our data. Many of our communities are characterized by a break in transmission, with older speakers (65yrs +) who learned the language through traditional family models being compared with children and young adults (new speakers) who are acquiring or have acquired the language through immersion or weekly community schools, often in order to infer change over time. In some cases, as previously mentioned, the input may be new speakers themselves. Even in communities like Galicia, where speakers grow

up bilingually, it is not clear that the model for acquisition or type of input is the same across generations. Apparent time relies on the assumption that speakers are from the same speech community and that the language is transmitted from generation to generation under similar conditions, but given the differences in method of acquisition, it is not clear that this is always the case in New Speaker communities. This raises important questions regarding the applicability of traditional LVC constructs to new speaker communities.

Conclusions & Outcomes

Our communities share many similarities, but are also characterized by a large number of differences; for example, in the type and age of acquisition, the level of bilingualism within the community as a whole and the domains in which language(s) are used. Such differences present us with many challenges, but also offer many opportunities, e.g., to question and refine traditional theoretical constructs, to develop innovative methodologies.

Our small workshop format was an ideal forum in which to explore ideas in the time available, and we were all able to contribute to the development of our aims and objectives. Breaking up into small groups of 2-3 people with the aim of developing concrete, achievable goals was particularly useful in this regard. Though at this initial stage we found it difficult to come up with concrete, long-term goals, we have put in place short and medium term goals which we hope will provide the foundation for longer term and larger-scale collaboration. Initially, we will propose a Colloquia session at the International Symposium of Bilingualism 2017, which will help to further raise the profile of work on the phonetics and phonology of new speakers. In the medium-term, we will continue to look for opportunities to fund seminar and workshop series that will enable us to meet more frequently to present and discuss ideas arising from our ongoing work (e.g., ESRC Seminar Series, not running 2016-17, AHRC Research Networking grants), and consider applications for a journal special issue to highlight the practical and theoretical challenges to the study of language variation and change arising from our work.

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References

O'Rourke, B., & Ramallo, F. (2011). The native-non-native dichotomy in minority language contexts: comparisons between Irish and Galician. *Language Problems and Language Planning*, vol. 35 (2).