

## Sociolinguistics in the Secular World: Variation, Theory and Observation

Sali A. Tagliamonte  
*University of Toronto*

The observation that a feature of language may alternate among forms with more or less the same meaning, as in (1), is what variationists refer to as 'the linguistic variable'.

(1) He **said**, "Nobody in their right **min'**..." He **'s like**, "Nobody your age, in their right mind, **mind** would come up and talk to a senior." (Toronto, female, aged 25)

As all variationists would agree, this variation is a vital part of the structure of the linguistic system and is pervasive throughout the grammar. Indeed, this is the central variationist perspective on language — order, yet differentiation (Weinreich 1968). However, people tend to deny this pervasive disorderliness, even though they are often aware that there is something amuck with language. This attitudinal overlay instills an essential duality to the variationist enterprise — linguistic, yet social (Sankoff 1988). In this mix, is also the fact that the language is forever changing. How can this messy data with its complex interplay of factors be analyzed?

In this presentation, I focus on variationist methods (Labov 1971, 1972; Sankoff 1974, etc.) by illustrating techniques used to analyze linguistic variables from different levels of grammar. While proportional analysis provides a consistent assessment of rates of variable processes, variable rule analysis (Sankoff 1979, 1985, 1988 etc.) can model the multiple, simultaneous, factors influencing linguistic choice. Further, it measures significance, conditioning and strength of factors. Tapping into the patterns of language use, i.e. the underlying constraints on frequency, can uncover a wealth of insight into the nature of the variable grammar (e.g. Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001). Such evidence can be used to trace the origins of features, and hence the (genetic) relationship of varieties to each other. It can also be used to compare and contrast among varieties, groups and individuals. Another level of explanation can be gleaned from appraising the relative strength of linguistic constraints. This nuance lays bare the weight of individual influences: which ones are strong, which weak, which inconsequential. Among other things, these lines of evidence can indicate how social and grammatical influences combine to effect linguistic change or to mask underlying processes. Deployed comparatively variationist findings can also be used to evaluate grammaticalization, parametric settings, and to differentiate universal processes from particular ones. Indeed, the increasing sophistication of variation analyses over the past 40 years has led to a deepening understanding of the processes underlying language variation and change.