

Heritage Language Variation and Change: The Case of Faetar in Faeto and Toronto

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Complete understanding of how linguistic variation constructs identity requires examining multilingual speakers' full repertoires, building on previous studies of their monolingual facets and patterns of code-mixing. Toronto, possibly the most multilingual city in the world, provides a perfect venue for changing this trend.

To complement projects focusing on the English of particular ethnically defined groups (Tagliamonte 2007, Walker & Hoffman 2008), we examine Mother Tongue variation and inter-generational change in 6 heritage language (HL) communities: Cantonese, Faetar, Italian, Korean, Russian, and Ukrainian. Using quantitative comparative methods, this project asks:

- Which features, structures, rules or constraints are cross-linguistically relevant to borrowing? Which are borrowed earlier and more often in HLs in contact with English?
- Do the same (types of) speakers lead changes in HLs and in English? *i.e.*, is leadership in language change inherent, or do innovators choose one language for this social “work”?

Our methods for constructing and analyzing a multilingual corpus of conversational speech are described, including the need to balance sensitivity to cultural differences with comparative methodology. Sociolinguistic interviews, ethnic orientation questionnaires and a picture-description task provide a range of data from first-, second- and third-generation speakers. We examine cross-linguistic variables whose conditioning differs from English (e.g., null subject, consonant cluster reduction) in order to advance a theory of linguistic change in the multilingual metropolitan environment.

To illustrate the methods and some early findings, we will report on lexical variation in the extremely small language Faetar, spoken in two tiny mountaintop villages in Apulia, and in Toronto.

References

- Tagliamonte, S. 2007. Directions of Change in Canadian English.
<http://individual.utoronto.ca/tagliamonte/directionsofchange.html>.
- Walker, J. & M. Hoffman. 2008. Language Contact, Linguistic Variation and Ethnic Identity in Toronto English 2008. <http://www.yorku.ca/jamesw/projects.htm>.