

Situating the individual in late-stage language change: Evidence from Received Pronunciation

In recent years, a growing body of work has addressed the situation of individual speakers vis-à-vis language changes that are ongoing in their communities. Though it is most common for individuals to remain stable in their rate of use of an incoming variant across their lives, presumably adhering to the way of speaking they acquired in childhood, longitudinal studies have now documented both ‘lifespan change’ (individual participation in ongoing change), and ‘retrograde change’ (individual movement against ongoing change) (see Wagner 2012 for an overview). However, due to the difficulty of obtaining appropriate data, case studies of the two latter trajectories are still lacking in the literature. The present paper addresses this gap by presenting a novel case study that demonstrates the utility of publicly-available recordings for this type of work.

We examine the speech of Sir David Attenborough, a well-known nature documentary narrator whose career spans half a century. Attenborough, born in London in 1926 and educated at Cambridge, speaks with Received Pronunciation (RP), and is thus a prime candidate for examination of the generational changes that have been observed in RP in the twentieth century. The variable under study in the present paper is the articulation of rhoticity. One feature of traditional RP is the use of a tapped /r/ ([ɾ]) in particular phonological environments, such as word-internally after a stressed vowel (e.g. *very*, *sorry*) (Wells 1982, Cruttenden 2013). The use of tapped /r/ declined over the twentieth century in favour of an approximant ([ɹ]) (Wells 1997, Fabricius 2014), leading us to examine whether the same has occurred within Attenborough's speech over time.

We examine Attenborough's narration in two nature documentaries, *Zoo Quest* (1959) and *Planet Earth* (2006), for evidence of lifespan change. Tokens of underlying /r/ after a stressed vowel were auditorily coded as being a tap or an approximant and were subjected to mixed-effects logistic regression.

The regression reveals Attenborough to exhibit what Wagner and Sankoff (2011) term ‘retrograde change’: he moves in the opposite direction of the community, significantly increasing his use of the tap in *Planet Earth* compared to *Zoo Quest* ($p < 0.001$). Interestingly, this change is found only in instances of linking /r/ (e.g. *the[r]e is*); Attenborough shows no significant change in word-internal /r/. We also find that, just as predicted by Wagner and Sankoff (2011), this retrograde movement occurs alongside style-shifting. When Attenborough is not narrating — for instance, when he is speaking to others onscreen — his use of the tap significantly decreases ($p = 0.02$ in 1959, $p < 0.001$ in 2006). This jibes nicely with Wagner and Sankoff's (2014) view of ‘seniorhood’ as a life stage during which elderly speakers recognise the conservatism of the age grade they have entered and modify their speech to match it, boosting their rate of use of variants that are stylistically marked as being more formal.

We conclude by discussing the implication of retrograde change for the nature of linguistic representations and connecting our findings to preliminary results on Attenborough's articulation of vowels and /t/.

References

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