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LANGUAGE, CHANGE AND IDENTITY[1]

THE IRISH IN 19TH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

1   NO IRISH NEED APPLY

This incriminating sentence abounded in job advertisements published in the wake of the 1868 assassination attempt on the life of the duke of Edinburgh in Australia. But reservations about the Irish component of the Australian community were high throughout the period under investigation. The above example only highlights the social stigma that was attached to being Irish in 19th century Australia.

As a group, the Irish were distinct from the other settlers and formed close communities. And yet, in the end, they assimilated to such an extent that today it would be very difficult to distinguish an Australian of Irish descent from Australians of other British extractions apart from the name and family lore.

Social integration is always tied up with the need of having to mix linguistically. The Irish were certainly, linguistically speaking, a very strange element in Australian society and thus the process of assimilation to today's levels must have been an intricate and profound one. To advance a convincing theory of dialect accommodation and to relate this empirically to the Irish situation in nineteenth century Australia is thus the aim of this paper.

2   DIALECTS IN CONTACT

What is Language?

This question is most controversial among linguists and probably as unsolvable as the question whether the hen or the egg was first. Every linguistic analysis is the direct result of certain theoretical assumptions such as the following (cf. Tobin 1990):

How do you define language?

How do you define a linguistic problem?

What are considered relevant data?

Only the first question will be addressed here.

Core and Periphery

Language is here defined as: *a highly structured system of interacting parts that facilitates communication among human beings*. Communication in this sense not only encompasses the

relations of information but also various other functions, like the phatic function or the integrative function (cf., for instance, Halliday 1978 and Jakobson and Halle 1957).

All interacting parts differ with respect to a number of variables that mark these as belonging to either the *core* (Z) or the *periphery* (P) of the system under investigation. There are, however, no absolute distinctions to be observed. Items can be more or less prototypical members of either category with only fuzzy borders between these. This will tentatively be called the Core-Periphery-Theory of Language (COP). COP applies principally to all levels of language, e.g. to phonology, lexis and syntax, and also to the human cognition of the outside world.

It is impossible to exactly 'measure' the 'centrality' of a particular item. Rickford (1985) and Weinreich (1953) relate this problem to the assumed value differences between lexis, phonology and syntax. The following approach bases the differentiation between core and peripheral members on several variable. Such a hierarchy defines the place of an item by looking at its relation to other items and thereby locating it within the individual system.

The principal variable distinguishing core members from peripheral members is the number of interactions and connections one item can form with other items (cf. Table 1). All the other categories are more or less derived from this one. The *communicative value* of an item is thus dependent on the amount of information that is contained in it. This includes its links with other items as well as its own status within the system. For instance, the concept [MARSUPIAL] is of low relevance in an Irish context but of high relevance in an Australian context.

TABLE 1: CORE AND PERIPHERY

	Arguments		Predicates	
	Core	Periphery	Core	Periphery
communicative value	high	low	high	low
no. of predicates	high	low	n.a.	n.a.
no. of arguments	n.a.	n.a.	high	low
frequency	high	low	high	low
regularity	n.a.	n.a.	high(?)	low(?)

The next variable is only applicable to the system of human cognition, i.e. the structuring of the arguments within the human mind. Here the *number of predicates* that can possibly be determined by a single argument is important. In the paradigm *lovely, attractive, beautiful, charming, comely, exquisite, graceful, handsome, pretty, sweet,* etc., the number of predicates for the same argument [LOVELY] is very high. Since Z items will have many

'shades of meaning', a high number of predicates can be expected. On the other hand, P items will have a low number of predicates, possibly only one.

The *number of arguments* that can determine a single predicate, and here we are back in the system of language proper, shows the Z status of the predicate in question, since its multifunctionality will allow it to appear frequently and in many different positions. Function words and auxiliary verbs are examples of such items.

Frequency is only a derived notion. It is Z status that makes an item frequent and not *vice versa*. Nevertheless, frequency, together with *regularity*, were put forth in the discussion of core and periphery within Prague School of Linguistics, as being the principal variables (cf. Daneš 1966 and Vachek 1966). That regularity is a difficult concept in this context is easily shown by the example of the *be*-paradigm. It is highly irregular and yet is a clear example of a Z item. It could even be argued that exactly because it is a Z item, and therefore frequent, it was possible for the paradigm to survive with all its irregularities. Despite this, regularity was regarded as a variable applicable more to Z than to P items in the abovementioned publications.

All these variables are dependent on each other and together they define the place of an item within a system. It is not likely that one item evidences all of these features, but taken together, they can show degrees of centrality of the items under investigation.

The list given is by no means complete. Further reflection should reveal more categories that aid us in understanding the theory of COP in language better.

Dialect Mixing

Any theory of dialect mixing has to account for the following factors:

1 What are the *preconditions* for a possible mixing of dialects?

2 In what *directions* and to what *extent* does accommodation take place?

3 In what *order* and at what *rate* do the items accommodate?

1 Accommodation will only take place when there is a definite linguistic and/or social *need* to do so. Otherwise, no accommodation will occur.

2 The aim of accommodation is a relatively homogeneous use of language within a speech community. This can be achieved either by two systems accommodating to each other (*bi-directional* accommodation) or by one system trying to change in the direction of the other system (*uni-directional* accommodation). The direction of the accommodation largely

corresponds to the principal impetus which started the process in the first place. If the aim was mutual comprehensibility, i.e. if there was a linguistic stimulus, the process is likely to be bi-directional. On the other hand, if the motivation was predominantly social, the process is likely to be uni-directional.

Accommodation does not necessarily lead to a complete merger of the two systems. It seems more reasonable to assume that any assimilation will only go as far as the initial motivation allowed for.

3 The order of accommodation depends on a variety of factors. These can be divided into two complementary groups, namely, *internal factors*, i.e. structural factors, notions of comprehensibility and the influence of the system accommodated to, and *external factors*, i.e. the influence of the socio-economic situation upon language. Examples of the latter are the level of linguistic awareness and the home-ties principle. The *rate* of change decreases in the course of time. This means that in the first period of dialect contact many divergent items change. Others accommodate only very slowly, very late, or not at all (cf. Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: DIALECT ACCOMMODATION OVER TIME
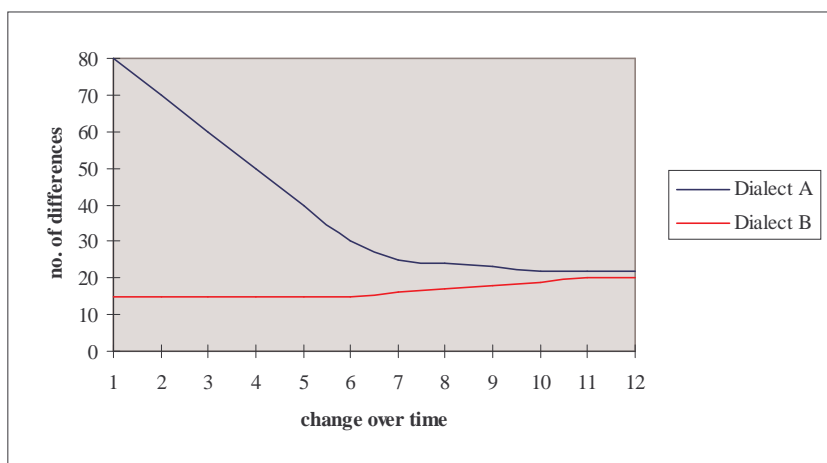
This figure shows an idealized example of the accommodation of two dialects over time. The number of structural differences are gradually reduced. The rate of accommodation decreases considerably when the differences are no longer numerous and most assimilation processes are to a great extent uni-directional with bi-directional changes occurring very late and then only to a marginal extent.

The Mode of Change

In this section the question of the *how* is addressed. The descriptive theory of Determinacy Analysis (DA), as advanced by Chesnokov and Luelsdorff (1991), is used as an explanatory model for the workings of change on the micro-level. DA looks at the frequencies of the determinacy containing a particular argument and a particular predicate, dependent on its immediate linguistic and non-linguistic context. In this way COP and DA can work together. The first defines the place of an item within the system of *langue*, as defined by de Saussure, and thus provides us with general insights into the systematic effects of change. The latter explains how this item interacts with other items and with the world at large, and thus deals with actual speech production, or *parole*.

Determinacies are of the form $x, z \rightarrow y$, $I = m$ and $C = n$, where x = argument, y = predicate, z = binder, and I and C are measurements of determinacy accuracy ($I = N(xy)/N(x))^2$ and completeness ($C = N(xy)/N(y))^3$, respectively.

DA can thus also be applied to the variables looked at for COP status. It was stated that if the number of predicates for a single argument, or the number of arguments for a single predicate, were high, then the item was a Z member (cf. Table 1). In terms of DA this means that arguments in determinacies with low values for I are Z members and that predicates in determinacies with low values for C are also Z members. Applied to dialects in contact this means that the original system at time t_0 has a determinacy of the form:[4]

a → b, t_0;　　I = 1.00 and C = 1.00;　　　[EMPLOYER] → 'employer'.

Then an additional determinacy is encountered at time t_1, namely

a → c, t_1;　　　　　　　　　[EMPLOYER] → 'governor'.

Now the originally fully accurate and complete system is in disorder. The measurements for I and C have to be recalculated. Since the argument [EMPLOYER] can now be predicated by either 'employer' or 'governor', the accuracy I of the original determinacy at t_0 is reduced from 1.00 to 0.50 at t_1.

a → b, t_1, I = 0.50 and C = 1.00

a → c, t_1, I = 0.50 and C = 1.00

Moreover, since the predicate 'governor' can also be determined by the argument [GOVERNOR], the completeness C of the new determinacy will be lowered at t_2 (with $t_1 \leq t_2$).

a → c, t_2, I = 0.50 and C = 0.50

d → c, t_2, I = 1.00 and C = 0.50

In actual language production such ambiguities do not exist. In every instance, either one of the variables is chosen. The actual observed frequencies of the outcomes of such determinacies are not solely dependent on the original values of I and C. Rather, the values of I and C are raised to 1.00, i.e. the production of a predicate becomes reliably predictable, by binders that affect the utterance. Below, binders that have a bearing on language production in a dialect contact situation are discussed.

Binding Factors

In the context of this paper, the internal and external factors of linguistic accommodation (cf. Figure 2) function as the relevant binders in language competence and performance. First, internal factors will be looked at and then external factors will be evaluated.

Internal factors are those that derive their power from structural, and therefore language internal, reasons. One of these is *systemic inertia*. This means that there has to be some contingent reason for the system to change, otherwise it will not. This does not imply that change is necessarily a conscious decision but that the chances of any variation leading to a general change are restricted by the already existing system.

The notion of *comprehensibility* is also easily explained. The possibility of being misunderstood, because the same item has different values and designations for two speakers may lead to change. An example of this would be the use of *creek* in an Australian ('small stream or river') and in a British ('a narrow inlet where the sea comes in') context. It is obvious that a 'new chum' will be quick at changing the original system in order to conform to the dominant usage.

The last internal factor under discussion here is the value of the item within the system accommodated to. If an item is of great importance in a particular speech-community, a newcomer is under strong pressure to adapt. This explains the immediate take-over of lexical items like *kangaroo,* by immigrants to Australia. Since there is a gap in the original lexicon but a strong position of this item in the community's lexicon, it is likely to be quickly adopted.

FIGURE 2: SUMMARY OF FACTORS INFLUENCING DIALECT ACCOMMODATION

This figure shows how the initial system is 'attacked' by various factors and that the home-ties principle and systemic inertia are 'defending' parameters. It also shows that no system is ever completely changed. There will always be some parts that are never affected.

Most external factors can be evaluated according to the principle of *social conspicuity*. This concept states that items that are very conspicuous markers of social identity are prone to be changed in a situation where an original identity is to be reinforced or a different one adopted.

Another factor is the level of linguistic awareness. The stereotypical notion of what constitutes the language of a speaker of Hiberno English (HE) can be very removed from actual usage. This is even true for observations of one's own speech behaviour or that of the speech community one lives in. In our context this means that items above the level of awareness are more likely to be linguistic markers of social identity and thus are more likely to change when the social surroundings of a speaker become different.

It seems apparent that any accommodation motivated by the need for social integration in a new society will have to face considerable resistance by the human need to cling to once cherished homes. "Good old Ireland", as it is very often called in emigrants' letters still functions as a focal point, even in the antipodes. This leads to a retention of features that have

an associative value for some speakers, despite the fact that other factors might militate against the continued use of this item. This can be seen in the wider notion of "colonial lag" which implies that life and speech in the colonies seems generally more conservative than in the mother country (but cf. Görlach 1987).

We have looked at various binders that influence the relative use of variable predicates. It remains to place this within the framework of DA. This will be done with the help of a short example.

1        $a \rightarrow b$, t_1, $I = 0.50$ and $C = 1.00$

2        $a \rightarrow c$, t_1, $I = 0.50$ and $C = 1.00$

An immigrant to Australia would have (1) as the original determinacy. This is then modified by experiencing determinacy (2) while in Australia. In order to decide which predicate will eventually be produced, it is necessary to look at the binders that raise or lower the accuracy of one or the other determinacy.

Every binder is a context dependent variable. If the predicate b endangers comprehensibility, e.g. when talking to a non-Irish person, then the frequencies of (1) will be lowered, while the frequencies of (2) will be raised respectively. If the same person is writing a letter home, the variable of comprehensibility will favour (1) over (2), since the addressee might not be familiar with (2) at all. By looking at every variable, an accurate prediction of the linguistic competence (knowledge of language) and performance (language use) of an individual is possible.

It is in the nature of the binding variables that their number is in principle infinite. Some of the binders might turn out to be irrelevant, others might be added to the Dictionary of Variables (DV).

What is Change?

Change always depends on variation, with variation also including the relative existence and non-existence of an entity. In the context of this paper, variation means the number of predicates for a single argument as well as the number of arguments with a single predicate. When there is great variation, change is very likely, because the choice of a particular variable is then extremely dependent on the number and the strength of the contextual binders. When the binder-system changes, as it certainly did for the HE speakers coming to Australia, the

frequencies of the production of a particular predicate are greatly affected. On the hand, when there is little variation, change is slow or does not occur at all. This means, that core items are considerably more prone to change than peripheral items. Moreover, change in a core item is a structural change that will alter the individual's system markedly. Change in a peripheral item is then of little linguistic interest and has only anecdotal value.

3 THE DATA

The corpus used in this investigation, which is a self-collected one, consists of 474 letters written in and to Australia from 1792 till 1921 comprising altogether 231,712 words. This corpus was subdivided into three sections for the present study. The first represents the letters written by Irish immigrants to Australia (350 letters; 137,319 words), the second the letters written from Ireland to emigrants in Australia (68; 39,951) and the last is a control-group of letters from and to Australia by various writers whose family origins were in either England or Scotland (56; 54,442). The first section is further divided along the lines of how much time had elapsed between the arrival of a person in Australia and the writing of the letter.

The linguistic reliability of the corpus, i.e. the extent to which the letters can be judged as being close to the spoken English of their writers, seems high. In an age that produced literally hundreds of grammars and letter manuals (cf. Michael 1987), the letters clearly show themselves to be unconcerned with the prescriptive notions of these books. It is, however, unlikely that the rules were deliberately flouted. Rather, ignorance of polite ways of writing letters and of using language can be assumed.

The last question to be addressed here is the representativeness of the letters. Are they typical instances of Australian English, Hiberno English or 19th century British English? This is indeed difficult to answer. The sheer number of letters would militate against the assumption that the language use shown in them is peripheral to 19th century speech. The notion of representativeness is also tied to the conceptualisation of AE as a unified entity, which was clearly not the case some 150 years ago (cf. Fritz 1996).

FIGURE 3: THE DISTRIBUTION OVER TIME FOR THE IRISH LETTERS
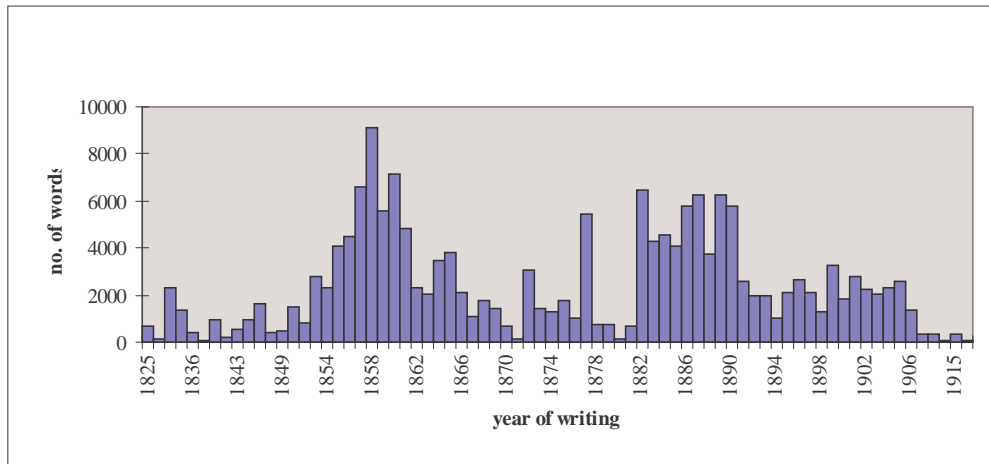
The above figure shows the distribution of the letters in the corpus over time. Since the letters are of extremely uneven length, the number of words in the letters of a given year provides a better insight into the composition of the corpus than the number of letters does.

The Methodology

The three sections of the corpus were investigated for various features. The underlying assumption is that the Irish immigrants to Australia changed their speech norms during their residence there. Therefore the letters written from Ireland can be seen as the original input the immigrants would have. The letters written back to Ireland evidence intermediate systems, the amount of change related to the time of stay and other factors, and the language of the third sub-corpus is taken as the target norm of an accommodation process. The investigation concentrated on items where change was likely. In this study, the changes of determinacies with the arguments [FOOD] and [+HABITUAL] are presented.

4   THE INVESTIGATION

Lexical Adaptations

The idea here is very obvious. Newcomers to Australia would find themselves in a social and natural environment that differed very much from their previous everyday experience. The need to talk about new concepts and to designate referents that had no existence in the home country was so urgent that an indigenous Australian lexis was assimilated swiftly. This functional requirement was reinforced by the social conspicuity the use of some items involves. The use of the word *paddock* to designate a small field where horses are kept would not only cause an almost certain misunderstanding but probably would also lead to guffaws from an *old hand*.

Evidence from the corpus clearly confirms these considerations. The first AE lexical items to appear are new words for new referents like *kangaroo* (and variations, 44 instances)*, dingo* (13 instances)*, boomerang* (and variations, 9 instances)*,* etc. Also very early we find a change in the meaning of some traditional words which have very specific uses in Australia. Examples include *station* (43), *run* (25) and *bush* (69 in various contexts). The latest to appear are new words for old concepts, i.e. new for the Irish immigrants, which were adopted for reasons of social integration. These include *grub* (2), *tucker* (11) and *graft* (5).

The characteristic development will now be shown with the examples of *food* and *tucker*. There is no instance of *tucker* in the letters from Ireland and only one instance of *food*. Thus the only distinctions to be made are those within the letters from Australia with respect to length of antipodean residence. The process of replacing an old item with a new one neatly surfaces in a sentence from the corpus where the writer himself felt the need to explain his use of *tack*:

> iri 147b: "[...] but indeed I had two good reasons, that is very hard work and bad tack (food)."

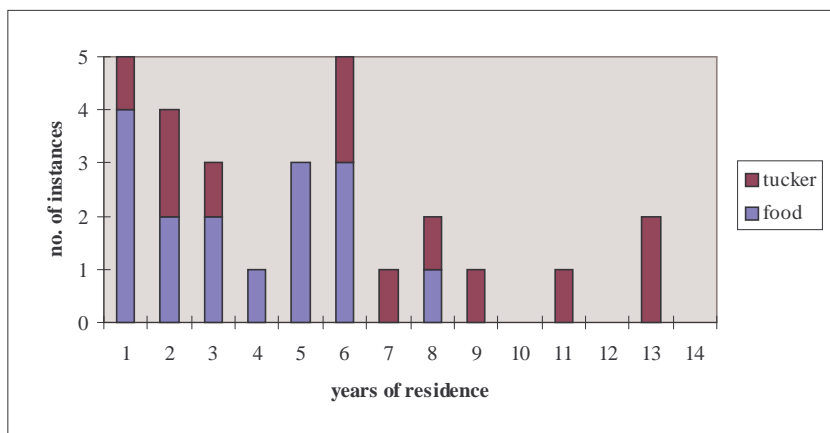FIGURE 4: THE DISTRIBUTION OF *FOOD* AND *TUCKER*[5]

Figure 4 clearly shows that the use of *tucker* was introduced early and that it gradually came to replace *food* as the dominant form for this meaning. Nevertheless, the table is not clear-cut, i.e. the coexistence of the items in question is variable, as it is in contemporary AE. The predicate *tucker* for the argument [FOOD] did not completely win out, but it is clear that the frequencies of the respective predicates did change. The appearance of either *food* or *tucker* is dependent on the linguistic and non-linguistic context of the utterance and these contextual binders changed. This means that the number of binding variables and the binding strength of the individual variables changed in respect to length of residence in Australia. Due

to the low frequencies of occurrence, it was not possible to distinguish the exact number and strength of the binders in the present study.

Such changes in lexis would have been experienced by most immigrants to Australia. The following investigation of [+HABITUAL], on the other hand, is peculiar to speakers of HE and their linguistic fate.

Habituality

Hiberno English has a distinct set of markers of habituality, namely *do+be+Ving, do+V, do+be+Adj/Adv, there+do+be+NP, do+be+Adj/V-en* and inflected *be* (cf. Kallen 1985, Kallen 1989, Harris 1993, etc.). In the corpus we find the distributions displayed in Table 2:

TABLE 2: HABITUAL MARKERS IN THE CORPUS

	do+be+V-ing	do+V	do+be+Adj/Adv	be	would	used to
predicate designation	a	b	c	d	e	f
letters to Ireland	1	50	1	4	12	29
letters to Australia	0	14	4	0	1	6
Control-group	0	5	0	0	3	10

The numbers obviously differ from each other, but so do the corpus sizes. Therefore the number of occurrences were all tested for statistical significance. First, the letters to Ireland were compared with the letters written back, the latter being regarded as the norm. A X^2-analysis revealed that the two groups differed significantly in their use of the *do+be+Adj/Adv* construction (at a level of <.001). This indicates that this habitual marker became increasingly obsolescent with speakers of HE in Australia. Interestingly, the two groups also differed widely in their use of the markers of habituality Present Day English employs. For *would* this was significant at the <.001 level and for *used to* at the <.05 level. This proves that the 'traditional' markers indicating habitual aspect succeeded in acquiring a powerful position in the linguistic systems of these people, although the strength of the non-standard construction of *do+V*, which was also the most frequent marker, was by no means diminished.

A statistical test was also employed for comparing the occurrences of habitual *would* and *used to* in the letters from Australia with those of the control-group. No significant result could be obtained, however. The comparison for *would* yielded a result at the level of <.20. Although this cannot be considered significant, this hints at the possibility of hypercorrection towards this use of *would*.

Altogether, the markers of habituality were shown to be on the move in the direction of a more standard pattern in the letters of Irish people settling in Australia. Now this finding will be restated in the terms of DA and COP.

1 THE IRISH INPUT SYSTEM

Argument   [+HABITUAL]

Predicate   *a, b, c, d, e, f* => $I = 0.1667$

$C = 1.00$ for *a, c, d* and *f*

$C < 1.00$ for *b* and *e*

2 THE SYSTEM OF THE CONTROL-GROUP

Argument   [+HABITUAL]

Predicate   *b, e* and *f*   => $I = 0.33$

$C = 1.00$ for *f*

$C < 1.00$ for *b* and *e*

The HE writers from Australia are changing from system 1 to system 2. They do this by increasing the frequencies for the predicates *e* and *f* and by lessening the frequencies for the predicate *c*.

[+HABITUAL] seems to be more central in an HE system than in an EngE system. This can be induced from the differences between the levels of variation in the predicates. The change, then, shows the move of an argument, namely [+HABITUAL], from a more central to a more peripheral position. This discovery raises many questions about the relation between the thought and language of an individual, which, however, cannot be further explored here.

5   CONCLUSIONS

The Irish succeeded in completely integrating into Australian society in the course of time. One factor in this process of re-defining one's identity and confirming the adoption of new values is the use of language. Since 19th century Hiberno English was clearly distinct from other contemporary British English varieties, various accommodation processes were necessary before the Irish could linguistically mesh.

Changes in the lexicon and the expression of habituality were looked at and were found to conform with the concepts of COP and DA. Language change was shown to be

dependent on variation, with core members being more prone to change than peripheral members. In general, changes can be towards higher variation, towards less variation and can also affect the frequencies of the variables in question. Moreover, every change redefines the place of an item within the system.

What this study has shown is that the still ill-understood process of dialect accommodation can be uncovered, measured and related to general theories of language.

Future work should aim at the establishment of a comprehensive theory establishing the respects in which dialects *can* differ. This would facilitate the investigation of a greater number of variables and their changing over time, showing which differences are levelled first and which later. In the end, it should be possible for a theory of a *natural order of accommodation* to be advanced, bearing in mind the structured existence of *langue*, *parole* and human cognition. As a hypothesis, it can be stated that the overall direction of change is dependent on structural factors with external factors determining the variable realizations of the items in question.

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[1] I wish to thank Philipp A. Luelsdorff, University of Regensburg, and Brian Taylor, University of Sydney for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[2] In words this means: The accuracy I of x → y is calculated by dividing the number of instances where this determinacy is true with the overall frequency for x. The central question here is, if we have an argument x, does it only predicate a y_0 or does it also predicate a y_1 and what are the exact frequency distributions for these?

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[3] The completeness C of x → y is calculated by dividing the number of instances where this determinacy is true with the overall frequency for y. The central question here is, if we have a predicate y, is it only determined by an argument x_0 or can it also be determined x_1 and what are the exact frequency distributions for these?

[4] The example given is idealised to facilitate explanation.

[5] The letters of one writer were not taken into consideration because his individual system allowed for the sole use of *food* until very late (he was later to leave Australia). Moreover, his letters are full of references to eating and thus would have skewed the results of the table.