

Old Habits: Rethinking variation in the Newfoundland English habitual past

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The English past habitual system is rich in both variants (*used to* V, *would* V, simple past) and in constraints on variation (discourse type, adverbial, verb class). Work by Tagliamonte & Lawrence (2000) on York English determined the constraints on variation (especially between *used to* and *would*), and found that *used to* was nearly twice as frequent as *would*. Later studies in Petty Harbour (NL) and West Virginia found similar constraints on variation, but a very different distribution, with *would* twice as frequent as *used to* (Van Herk & Hazen 2011). Those authors hypothesized that their findings resulted from *would* being favoured in southwestern England, a pattern carried over with settlers to the New World. This interpretation is challenged, however, by the findings of McLarty et al. (2014) for Oregon English, where *would* is by far the preferred variant, even though there is no likely SWE dialect input.

The present study adds another data point, by investigating past temporal reference (N=2243) in the English of Corner Brook, a small city in western Newfoundland. Corner Brook shares SWE input with the communities of the 2011 study, but is far from the provincial capital and presumed to maintain traditional forms. We find that *used to* remains robust there, and shares the constraints found in other communities. This supports McLarty et al.'s suggestion of change in progress over the regional input hypothesis of Van Herk & Hazen. The different communities studied seem to represent a cline of change: York is the most conservative, as it is for multiple variables (e.g., Ito & Tagliamonte 2003), followed by Corner Brook and then Petty Harbour and West Virginia. Oregon represents the leading edge of change: there, *used to* has become so infrequent that it seems to be losing its original function and taking on a new one, consistent with other recent studies of obsolescing variants (Van Herk & Childs 2014). This study supports the value of studying below-the-radar changes to show how change can occur even in the absence of stigma or any socially assigned meaning at all, and of keeping a place for rate of variant use in our discussions of inter-community linguistic differences.

References

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