

I DON'T KNOW in Toronto and Victoria: Comparing analyses of discourse variation

Nicole Hildebrand-Edgar, PhD Candidate, York University

The direct comparison of discourse variables across corpora, using consistent methodology, enables a more holistic, generalizable account of patterns in language change and variation [1]. This paper replicates previous methodology in the analysis of the construction I DON'T KNOW to provide such an account.

The use of negative epistemic construction I DON'T KNOW to encode pragmatic meaning (e.g. (1)) is now well established (e.g. [2;3;4;5;6;7;8]).

- (1) hey at Christmas they used to get like **I don't know** sweaters like pants and socks stuff like that (IM0/11)

This semantic shift has been attributed to the grammaticalization of the construction: pragmatic I DON'T KNOW resides predominantly in syntactically unbound constructions, and is more prone to phonetic erosion [2;3;4]. Consistent findings of this form-function relationship in multiple varieties of English suggest pragmatic I DON'T KNOW has become a conventionalized discourse marker. A previously unreported effect of speaker age was reported in Victoria, British Columbia: the frequency of the phonetically reduced pragmatic form is reported to be increasing in apparent time [4].

In order to examine whether this pattern identified in Victoria is community specific or indicative of a new stage of grammaticalization, this paper replicates the methodology of previous examinations of I DON'T KNOW. The data come from the Contact in the City Corpus [10]. Extraction is concentrated on 60-minute segments of sociolinguistic interviews from 36 speakers from Toronto, ranging from 17 to 66 years of age. In total, 497 tokens were extracted. Given that discourse-pragmatic variables are inherently less frequent than phonological variables (e.g. [11]), the stratification of the sample and the form/function asymmetry that characterize the variable enable examination of usage patterns across a range of social and linguistic contexts. The variable context is defined in terms of the underlying structure (e.g. [1]); four phonetic variants are identified based on the degree of phonetic erosion. The variationist toolkit is employed to examine the form-function relationship of the construction; qualitative methods are used to determine the pragmatic function of tokens. While previous studies have only examined the effects of age and gender on the use of I DON'T KNOW, this paper additionally examines the effect of ethnic identity on the patterning of the construction. Speakers in the sample identified as having British/Irish, Chinese, or Italian ancestry. Older speakers who were born abroad were included to determine whether L1 transfer persists in later generations (e.g. [10]).

Analysis of patterning across social and linguistic factors yielded results that are consistent with those from previous analyses [2;3;4], suggesting a universal path of grammaticalization for I DON'T KNOW. Variant choice was consistent among younger Canadian-born speakers regardless of ethnic background; persistent language transfer is therefore not supported. However, as in Victoria, the phonetically reduced pragmatic form is increasing in apparent time in Toronto, suggesting generational change in the discourse marker I DON'T KNOW. I argue that the generational change observed in the patterning of variants is not indicative of an emerging new form, but rather the phonetic reduction of an already grammaticalized form. A universal path of grammaticalization underlies the development of this construction, and frequency effects are driving its ongoing change: the grammaticalized form, available for a broader range of discourse functions, is produced more often and is consequently subject to further phonetic reduction.

Works Cited

1. Pichler, H. (2010). Methods in discourse variation analysis: Reflections on the way forward. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 14(5), 581–608.
2. Scheibman, J. (2000). *I dunno*: A usage-based account of the phonological reduction of *don't* in American English conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32, 105-124.
3. Pichler, H. (2009). The functional and social reality of discourse variants in a northern English dialect: I DON'T KNOW and I DON'T THINK compared. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 6(4), 561-596.
4. Hildebrand-Edgar, N. (2016). Disentangling frequency effects and grammaticalization. *Working Papers of the Linguistics Circle*, 26(1), 1-23.
5. Tagliamonte, S. (2016). *Teen Talk: The language of adolescents*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
6. Grant, L. (2010). A corpus comparison of the use of I don't know by British and New Zealand speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(8), 2282-2296.
7. Diani, G. (2004). The discourse functions of *I don't know*. In K. Aijmer & A. Stenström (Eds.): *Discourse patterns in spoken and written corpora*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 157-171.
8. Weatherall, A. (2011). I don't know as a Prepositioned Epistemic Hedge. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 44(4), 317-337.
9. Hopper, P. and Traugott, E. (2003). *Grammaticalization*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10. Hoffman, M. F., & Walker, J. A. (2010). Ethnolects and the city: Ethnic orientation and linguistic variation in Toronto English. *Language Variation and Change*, 22(01), 37-67.
11. Cheshire, J. (2007). Discourse variation, grammaticalization and stuff like that. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 11(2), 155-193.