

On the spatial diffusion of linguistic changes: new methods and theoretical perspectives

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One of the first roles of dialectology was to inform diachronic linguistics, by using spatial configurations of language variants to deduct patterns of linguistic variation and change. An early example of such approach was Schmidt's (1872) Wave model (*Wellentheorie*), which constituted a valuable alternative to the Tree model as it was better suited to account for situations of dialect continua. Similarly, the distribution of linguistic variants in the physical space can be used to detect the original focus of linguistic innovations and determine the direction of changes (Bailey et al. 1993). The interaction between dialectology and sociolinguistics has also been fruitful. It has been shown that changes "from below" extend through contiguous areas and delimit precise zones, while changes "from above" draw isolated areas following the so-called gravity model (cf. Chambers & Trudgill 1980; Nevalainen 2000; De Benito Moreno 2020).

Despite the initial connection between linguistic theory and dialectology, both currents seem to have parted ways to a large extent. Whereas dialectology has been slow to incorporate the advances of linguistics and sociolinguistics (Trudgill, 1974), recent theoretical trends in historical linguistics, such as grammaticalization, have disregarded the geographical distribution of variable traits. Such dissociation is unfortunate, as localizing competing variants in space has been shown to be crucial in the formulation of hypotheses about the causes and conditioning factors of linguistic changes in grammaticalization processes (Del Barrio 2016, Rodríguez Molina 2010).

At the present time, the study of language variation from a geographical perspective is the subject of renewed interest. This trend has been facilitated by various theoretical, methodological and technological developments. Linguistic typology has highlighted the importance of linguistic areas upon the observation that the centuries-old coexistence of languages in the same geographical space results in their sharing structural properties. At the same time, new developments in the study of language and dialect contact and bilingualism have enriched the theoretical framework that must be used to study linguistic changes across space. Likewise, the creation of new corpora and databases that allow accessing historical data of individual languages sorted by geographical origin is facilitating the creation of renewed historical investigations that consider the spatial factor (i.e. corpora such as CODEA for central Ibero-Romance dialects). Finally, the availability of digital tools (such as OpenStreetMap) has facilitated the mapping of linguistic data (i.e. resources such as WALS, APICS or the aforementioned CODEA). Finally, the capabilities afforded by massive geolocalized data from social media apps offer unprecedented possibilities for observing the diffusion of changes (i.e. the emergence of new discourse markers) in real time.

In sum, the aforementioned advances present great opportunities for taking a new look at the interplay between geographical variation and diachrony; at the same time, however, these

developments raise new theoretical, empirical and methodological challenges that we intend to address in this workshop:

(a) At a descriptive level, many individual languages lack a systematic study for the history of their dialectal configuration. In most cases the existing studies are characterized by their atomism and lack of uniformity in terms of approach, data sources and chronological periods considered. A unitary approach that considers the coordinated study of the geographical diffusion for a large number of phenomena can reveal interrelationships between structures of great interest to grammatical theory (Hinskens, 2018).

(b) Traditional approaches to diachronic geographical variation have often assumed the existence of varieties associated with historical-political entities as a starting point (kingdoms, counties, administrative units). Conversely, recent approaches tend to focus on the role played by geographical measures in the spatial distribution of linguistic features, such as Euclidian or traveling distances (Jeszenszky et al., 2017). Combining both approaches could be advantageous for the study of diachrony.

(c) Traditional studies privileged phonetic phenomena when establishing dialect boundaries, without paying the same attention to morphosyntactic phenomena. It is therefore necessary to restore a balance between different levels of analysis, also including the lexical and discursive components.

(d) In studies of dialectal phenomena, there is a tendency to record categorical features instead of considering frequencies of use of the variables. New methodologies are better suited to incorporate the density of the phenomena on the physical space and not only their mere presence.

(e) New technologies are facilitating renewed perspectives that transcend the traditional concept of speech community associated with a compact territory; new approaches may conceive the entire world as a community of interconnected cities, towns and neighborhoods.

Call for papers

As part of the 56th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea (29 August – 1 September, Athens) we invite submissions with original research that considers the following issues or related ones:

- Methodological approaches that allow for the simultaneous examination of the spatial distribution of several variables (as opposed to the isolated study of single variables).
- Studies addressing clustered phenomena that might hint at joint evolutions, or chain shifts.
- Investigations that integrate the role of both physical and political space through history.
- Studies that aim to restore the balance between all levels of analysis (including the lexical and discourse components), as opposed to traditional approaches that privileged phonetic variables.
- Methodological approaches that address the interplay between register and geographical variation in the study of diachronic change.

- Methodological approaches and visualization techniques that integrate frequency of use in the study of geographical variation through history, as opposed to categorical data (presence vs. absence of a variant).
- Studies based on synchronic data (e.g. from online social networks) that can shed light onto historical processes.

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