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Variation and third age: A sociolinguistic perspective

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Abstract: The correlation between external factors such as age, gender, ethnic group membership and language variation is one of the stalwarts of sociolinguistic theory. The repertoire of individual members of speaker groups, vis-à-vis community-wide variation, represents a somewhat slippery ground for developing and testing models of variation and change and has been researched with reference to accommodation (Bell 1984), style shifting (Rickford, John R. & MacKenzie Price. 2013. *Girlz II women: Age-grading, language change and stylistic variation. Journal of Sociolinguistics* 17. 143–179) and language change generally (Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of linguistic change, vol. 2: Social factors*. Oxford: Blackwell). This paper presents and assesses some first quantitative evidence that non-mobile older speakers from Tristan da Cunha, an island in the South Atlantic Ocean, who grew up in an utterly isolated speech community, vary and shift according to external interview parameters (interviewer, topic, place of interview). However, while they respond to the formality of the context, they display variation (both regarding speakers and variables) that is not in line with the constraints attested elsewhere. These findings are assessed with focus on the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in third-age speakers (particularly style-shifting, Labov, William. 1964. *Stages in the acquisition of Standard English*. In Roger Shuy, Alva Davis & Robert Hogan (eds.), *Social Dialects and Language Learning*, 77–104. Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English) and across the life-span generally.

Keywords: variation, third age, Tristan da Cunha English

1 Introduction

For a long time, studying language change in progress was thought to be a mission impossible – as epitomized in Bloomfield’s famous dictum that “[t]he process of linguistic change has never been directly observed: we shall see that such observations, with our present facilities, are inconceivable” (1933: 247). Though Bloomfield’s “present facilities” have changed immensely, the analysis of ongoing change remains a major challenge in sociolinguistic theory. Change is permanent, affecting both linguistic systems and speech communities, yet it operates via language usage that is inherently speaker-based (see Labov 2001). For almost five decades now, sociolinguists have demonstrated the effects of variation on individual speakers and uncovered their role and function in the process of community-wide change under different roles such as innovators, diffusers, etc (Milroy and Milroy 1985). Speakers respond to their environments via ordered heterogeneity (Weinreich et al. 1968: 100): they cluster in ethnic groups and age cohorts, respond to the formality of the social situation (though style as a sociolinguistic concept remains difficult to define), while at the same time engaging in a community-wide process of ongoing change. One of the great discoveries in sociolinguistic theory was that inter-individual variation with regard to the environments of an interaction was systematic and rule-governed, allowing community-wide modeling in real- and apparent-time constructs. In the words of Labov:

One of the fundamental principles of sociolinguistic investigation might simply be stated as: There are no single-style speakers. By this we mean that every speaker will show some variation in phonological and syntactic rules according to the immediate context in which he is speaking (Labov [1969]2003: 234).

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Several questions loom large in this context. First, is “responsiveness to context” (to use a deliberately wide term) an active or a passive process? Is it either primarily responsive (namely as a process of mutual accommodation to other speakers, see for instance Bell’s 1984 work on audience design) or else orchestrated as performance speech and persona construction via style-shifting or identity construction (thus active; cf. Rickford and Price 2013 on “stylistic chameleons”)? Second, context-sensitive variation occurs on a speaker level and is an individual process; the question, then, is how efforts of single speakers are coordinated in a necessarily collective process of teleological language change. How do the pathways of individual patterns of variation result in permanent language change that necessarily is a collective enterprise? (cf. the sociolinguistic adage “there can be variation without change, but there can never be change without variation”). If a variable is found to increase or decrease significantly across age groups, then we must ask whether it is evidence of language change or age-grading (Weinreich et al. 1968). Third, and particularly important for the present topic, there is very little sociolinguistic research (see for instance MacKenzie 2019; Pichler et al. 2018) on how the speakers’ biological age affects the overall rate of intra-individual variation in general (in contrast to cognitive psychology, where cognitive and neuropsychological functions across the lifespan have been the focus of interest in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies; Lövdén et al. 2007; Robertson et al. 2006; Salthouse 2007). More specifically, to what extent do elderly speakers respond to environmental parameters in their usage of sociolinguistic variables? Whereas research has focused on the role of adolescents as prime agents in language change (Tagliamonte 2016), comparatively little is known about style-shifting and individual variation in the speech of elderly people generally. This is a research lacuna with great potential for future exploration (see Pfenninger and Singleton 2019 for a critical assessment on language learning in third age).

2 Tristan da Cunha: A very short historical sketch

Tristan da Cunha lies in the South Atlantic Ocean, some 2,800 km west of Cape Town, South Africa (current population 264). The community developed out of founding populations that involved British settlers from Scotland and various localities in England, St Helena, Denmark and the Netherlands (thus adding second-language varieties of English to the melting pot), and American whalers who arrived in the 1840s (see Brander 1940; Crawford 1982; Munch 1945; Schreier 2003 for detailed accounts). The early (1816 – ca. 1850) settlement period was followed by growing isolation (Crawford 1980), which lasted well into the 20th century. Before WWII, the islanders lived in pre-industrialized conditions (Munch 1945) and only six out of a total of 170 Tristanians had left the island (Crawford 1999: 151).

This changed in April 1942, when a British navy corps was sent to the island and a permanent fishing industry was established there. There was economic prosperity in the 1970s and 80s and an increase in mobility (mostly for secondary education and further job training) accompanied the opening-up of the community. Transport possibilities increased and education and further job training became available; as the islanders’ standard of living improved and they received regular incomes, they began traveling to South Africa, St Helena and Great Britain more frequently. Within two generations, there was a radical transformation from a non-mobile community, where only half a dozen of its members had ever left the island, to a much more open one where nearly every individual has now spent some time off the island (and babies are born in South African hospitals).

The local dialect has a special status among the canon of World Englishes in that it developed on one of the most isolated places on earth (paralleled by few other settings, such as Palmerston Island, Hendery 2015). While isolation is notoriously difficult to define as an independent sociolinguistic variable (Schreier 2009), the community’s social networks are extraordinarily dense and multiplex (Milroy and Milroy 1985). The social tapestry was negotiated historically as the “social structure of this community was simple and informal, consisting of a number of largely independent family units tied together by bilateral kinship and mutual recognition, but without any formal authority or control” (Munch 1964: 369–370).

The community's development in the 20th century provides an ideal window of opportunity for research on context-induced variation in immobile third-age speakers, and the nature of existing data substantiates it further. In the early 1960s, the Tristanians had to be evacuated due to volcanic activities on the island and the University College of London (UCL), in collaboration with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), tape-recorded about two dozen speakers when they were in English exile, put up in Calshot Camp near Southampton (some descriptive results were reported in Zettersten 1969). When they returned to the island in 1963, Roland Svensson, a Swedish artist, traveler and philanthropist sailed back with them and recorded some members of the community so as to collect personal memories and anecdotes of island life.

As a result, several members of the community were recorded twice: by journalists and academics in English exile and then again about a year later in their South Atlantic homes (or en route to the native island) and in the late 1960s when they had re-established themselves on Tristan da Cunha. The two interview settings differed considerably and the islanders found themselves in different contexts. The BBC/UCL context involved a highly formal setting and interaction with complete strangers, the Tristan da Cunha one in their own homes when talking to an outsider they knew well and respected highly.

3 Methodology

The Tristan da Cunha corpus contains sociolinguistic interviews with more than a hundred Tristanians born between 1876 and 1889 and comes from four corpora: the 1961–1962 BBC/UCL corpus (compiled in Calshot Camp), the Munch/Svensson corpus (1963, 1964, 1965, 1970, collected by Roland Svensson on the island, with a few interviews made by Peter Munch, the Norwegian sociologist), the Schreier corpus (recordings made by myself in 1999, 2002, and 2010) and the Scottish corpus (2006, compiled by two Scottish researchers with the aim of collecting oral history material). Some Tristanians were recorded several times, by the same fieldworker but also by different ones, in various settings (England, Tristan da Cunha) and some over a time span of 40 years (which allows for future study of change in progress). The focus here is on four speakers: GIgo (male; 1899–1995), SwMa (female; 1895–1974), GIsy (male; 1910–1994), and RoWi (male; 1889–1963). All four were aged between ca. 50 and 70 years at the time they left the island for the first time, which means that none of them had spent time in other speech communities. They all were past the schooling age when the garrison arrived and education became compulsory.

We have recordings for all four speakers in both settings (length varies from 9 to 45 min, with a sub-corpus of 27,305 words): all four were interviewed by the BBC/UCL representatives in 1961–1962, two of them (GIsy, RoWi) additionally by Roland Svensson, and the remaining two (GIgo and SwMa) by Peter Munch as well, which means that we have three sets of data. As is standard practice in variationist research, we selected three sociolinguistic variables (two morphosyntactic, one phonological) that occur frequently in the data and are found in all three interview modes: past tense marking, past *be* leveling, and /h/ insertion. Statistical analyses were conducted using mixed-effects models with crossed random effects for subjects, using the *lme4* package (Version 1.1-7) in R (Version 3.1.0; R Development Core Team, 2020). I used visual inspection of residual plots in order to find out if there were any obvious deviations from homoscedasticity or normality. Models were fitted using a maximum likelihood technique. *P*-values were obtained by likelihood ratio tests of the full model with the effect in question against the model without the effect in question. Our hypothesis is that the four speakers will vary by context and use more local, non-standard features when interviewed en route to Tristan or on their home island than they did when recorded by strangers in formal contexts exerted by exile in England.

4 Results

4.1 /h/ insertion

The first (phonological) variable involves the insertion of /h/ in words that begin with a vowel and carry initial stress (*island, apple, understand, I, etc.*). /h/ insertion has been studied historically and (as English dialect

roots) in varieties of English around the world (see Schreier 2020 for a detailed survey). On Tristan, it was observed in the 1930s (“the tendency to add an “h” before vowels makes all islanders “highlanders”!”; Crawford 1982: 49, reflecting on his impressions before WW II). We extracted all words where /h/ could be inserted optionally and normalized frequency (per 1000 words; see Schreier 2019 for a presentation of methodological principles employed). All four speakers use the variable in both interview settings, sometimes varying within a sentence:

1. “We give Ø each one so many. And then they (h)ordered potatoes, see, into the Ø island, and then they give Ø every cellar like a (h)onion size bag.” (GIgo, born 1899)
2. “It’s the best to place a postal (h)order when you go down to the post Ø office.” (SwMa, born 1895)

Table 1 provides the results of /h/ insertion for each of the speakers in all interview modes (2–3) per speaker. Insertions rates vary from 8.16 (GIgo, BBC 1961) to 18.96 per 1000 words (GISy, BBC 1961). Only one speaker (GIgo) has higher /h/ insertion rates when interviewed on the island than by BBC/UCL, whereas it is the other way around for two speakers (RoWi and GISy).

4.2 Past *be* leveling

The usage of *was* for standard *were* (*we was*) is widely documented in English varieties around the world (e.g. British English, White American English, New Zealand English, St Helenian English, etc.; Hazen 2014; Schreier 2020; Tagliamonte 1998) and one of the most researched variables in English. The internal constraint hierarchy is particularly diagnostic but overall leveling rates have received attention as well, with rural and working-class varieties typically having highest frequencies overall (Schreier 2020). Earlier research (Schreier 2002) has shown that early 20th century Tristan da Cunha English features one of the highest leveling rates worldwide, which was explained by a combination of settlement history (particularly working-class input varieties), limited contact with other speech communities and the absence of formal education. Accordingly, Table 2 shows that all four speakers have high leveling and have between 0.00 and 7.53 tokens per 1000 words (in fact, RoWi and GISy have 100%, participating in categorical language change as discussed in Schreier 2002; note, however, that there are only a few tokens available for some recordings).

4.3 Zero past marking

Variation between inflected and unmarked past-temporal reference verbs has been singled out as one of the most important variables in contact linguistics and creole studies (Hackert 2008: 127). When analyzing past

Table 1: /h/ insertion in the three corpora.

Year of recording										
Speaker	Born	Sex	Rec.	/h/	Ø	Total	N	%	Word count	Per 1000 words
RoWi	1889	Male	1962	49	546	595	49/595	8.2%	3853	12.72
			1963	14	194	208	14/208	6.7%	1374	10.19
SwMa	1895	Female	1961	17	210	227	17/227	7.5%	1488	11.42
			1964	78	712	790	78/790	9.9%	6006	12.99
			1970	56	745	801	56/801	7.0%	5636	9.94
GIgo	1899	Male	1961	7	135	142	7/142	4.9%	858	8.16
			1963	13	249	262	13/262	5.0%	1496	8.69
			1965	29	269	298	29/298	9.7%	2485	11.67
GISy	1910	Male	1961	15	120	135	15/135	11.1%	791	18.96
			1970	43	462	505	43/505	8.5%	3318	12.96
Total				321	3642	3963	321/3963	8.1%	27,305	11.76

Table 2: Past *be* leveling rates in the three corpora.

Year of recording										
Speaker	Born	Sex	Rec.	Zero	Marked	Total	N	%	Word count	Per 1000 words
RoWi	1889	Male	1962	16	0	16	16/16	100.0%	3853	4.15
RoWi	1889	Male	1963	0	0	0	0/0	N/A	1374	0.00
SwMa	1895	Female	1961	4	0	4	4/4	100.0%	1488	2.69
SwMa	1895	Female	1964	27	1	28	27/28	96.4%	6006	4.50
SwMa	1895	Female	1970	21	4	25	21/25	84.0%	5636	3.73
GIgo	1899	Male	1961	2	1	3	2/3	66.7%	858	2.33
GIgo	1899	Male	1963	2	0	2	2/2	100.0%	1496	1.34
GIgo	1899	Male	1965	12	0	12	12/12	100.0%	2485	4.83
GISy	1910	Male	1961	1	1	2	1/2	50.0%	791	1.26
GISy	1910	Male	1970	25	0	25	25/25	100.0%	3318	7.53
Total				110	7	117	110/117	94.0%	27,305	4.03

marking, we followed the methodological criteria adopted by Hackert (2004), excluding all past participles as well as non-standard constructions (preverbal *usetā*, for instance, but including the primary verb *have* both as a main verb and semimodal *have to*; Hackert 2004, 2008). Nearly all studies focus on morphological variation in the main (lexical finite) verbs. Examples include:

3. “When I *see* the boat was coming on top me I was on my back in the water” (RoWi, born 1889)
4. “I *run* in and I said to my auntie – “Auntie”, I said, “what’s wrong?”” (SwMa, born 1895)

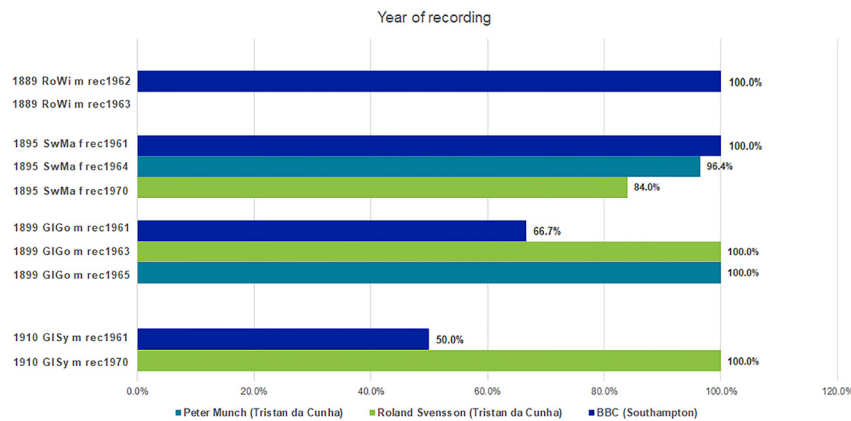
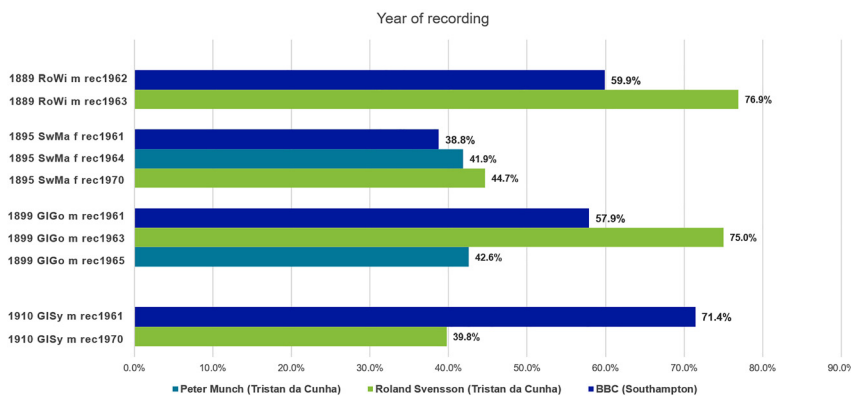
The overall rate of zero past tense marking in TdCE is 52% ($n = 2744$; Marković 2017) and it is frequent in all four speakers, ranging from 42.9% ($n = 678$, SwMa) to 62.4% ($n = 178$, RoWi). Table 3 summarizes the findings per speaker and corpus and shows that all four speakers vary in overall frequency of this variable (GIgo ranges between 12.82 and 32.09 per 1000 words).

5 Variation and third age: Sociolinguistic implications

Perhaps the most immediate finding is that all four speakers vary by context in all three sociolinguistic variables; there are “no single-style speakers” (Labov 1984: 29). However, if the null hypothesis was correct, they would have used more local, non-standard features when interviewed en route to Tristan or on their home island than when they were in British exile, and this is where interpretations become more complex. We can partially confirm the hypothesis for zero past marking (SwMa: BBC/UCL 38.8%, TdC (1964) 41.9%, TdC (1970) 44.7%; RoWi: BBC/UCL 59.9%, TdC (1963) 76.9%) past *be* leveling (GISy: BBC/UCL 50.0%, TdC 100%; caveat: low token numbers; GIgo: BBC/UCL 66.7%, TdC 100%) and /h/ insertion (GIgo: BBC/UCL 4.9%, TdC 9.7%). However, this is not confirmed in nearly half of the recordings (zero past marking – GISy: BBC/UCL 71.4%, TdC (1963) 39.8%, past *be* leveling – SwMa: BBC/UCL 100.0%, TdC (1964) 96.4%, TdC (1970) 84.0%, /h/ insertion GISy: BBC/UCL 11.1%, TdC (1970) 8.5%, RoWi: BBC/UCL 8.2%, TdC (1963) 6.7%). All four individuals show a higher usage of local non-standard features when interviewed by outsiders in a formal setting, but the trend is not consistent. SwMa (female, born 1895) displays the expected hierarchy in past *be* leveling yet reverses it in zero past marking; similarly, GISy (male, born 1910) has higher usage of local features in zero past marking than in past *be* leveling (see Figures 1 and 2). In other words, context-related effects are reversed for all speakers and variables: context-sensitive variation is variable-dependent. However, interview setting had no significant impact on the linguistic forms in question (i.e. model fit was not improved by adding interview setting: for h-insertion: $\beta = 36.25 \pm 27.72$, $t = 1.31$, $p = 0.157$; for past *be*-leveling: $\beta = 16.00 \pm 10.71$, $t = 1.49$, $p = 0.112$; for zero past marking: $\beta = 76.75 \pm 61.89$, $t = 1.24$, $p = 0.17$).

Table 3: Zero past marking rates in the three corpora.

Year of recording	Zero	Marked	Total	N	%	Word count	Per 1000 words
1889 RoWi m rec1962	91	61	152	91/152	59.9%	3853	23.62
1889 RoWi m rec1963	20	6	26	20/26	76.9%	1374	14.56
1895 SwMa f rec1961	19	30	49	19/49	38.8%	1488	12.77
1895 SwMa f rec1964	142	197	339	142/339	41.9%	6006	23.64
1895 SwMa f rec1970	134	166	300	134/300	44.7%	5636	23.78
1899 GIgo m rec1961	11	8	19	11/19	57.9%	858	12.82
1899 GIgo m rec1963	48	16	64	48/64	75.0%	1496	32.09
1899 GIgo m rec1965	66	89	155	66/155	42.6%	2485	26.56
1910 GISy m rec1961	15	6	21	15/21	71.4%	791	18.96
1910 GISy m rec1970	33	50	83	33/83	39.8%	3318	9.95
Total	579	629	1208	579/1208	47.9%	27,305	21.20

**Figure 1:** Past *be* leveling in the three corpora.**Figure 2:** Zero past marking in the three corpora.

How are we to interpret this finding? Variation with regard to setting and context has been attested since the first wave of variationist sociolinguistics (Labov 1966; Trudgill 1974), so that vernacular usage (in adult speakers) correlated with interview context consistently (with formal tasks such as reading word lists having significantly higher percentages of standard forms than free or vernacular speech). The elderly speakers from Tristan da Cunha, however, defy such categorizations, both on speaker and variable levels. Variation simply does not align along the formality/informality axis as expected (Figure 3).

	/h/ insertion	Past <i>be</i> leveling	Zero past marking
RoWi	✗	n.a.	✓
SwMa	✓	✗	✓
GIGo	✓	✓	✗
GISy	✗	✓	✗

Figure 3: Confirmation/rejection of null hypothesis by speaker and variable (✓ = confirmed, ✗ = rejected).

It would be possible to explain this as inter- and intra-individual variation (Schreier 2014 discussed speaker-specific preference for /h/ insertion with regard to sociolinguistic repertoire, formality of data, and interviewer effects). However, this would be stating the obvious without explanatory ambition, so I would suggest an alternative approach to understanding why we find such an inconsistent pattern that cross-sects both speakers and variables. The acquisition of a sociolinguistic repertoire remains a research lacuna in variationist sociolinguistics and as we saw above, there is little research about the development of stylistic competence across an individual’s lifespan. According to Roberts (2005: 153–154), the acquisition of variation “is not a by-product of the learning process, but an integral part of acquisition itself” (see also Pfenninger this special issue and Verspoor et al. this special issue).

Studies of stylistic acquisition have been carried out with African American children, who varied according to interviewer and interview setting (Labov 1972; see overview in Roberts 2005), children in Glasgow (Macaulay 1977), Jakarta/Indonesia (Kushartanti 2014) and Milton Keynes (Kerswill and Williams 2000). Crucially, all of these studies focus on children and adolescents, as they are generally seen as prime agents in the promotion of language change (Eckert 1988; “teenagers are the innovators and the movers and shakers of language change”, Tagliamonte 2016: xiv) and this is also found in work on new-dialect formation (“the formation of a new dialect in a new town is in the gift of children, not adults, because [...] adults’ speech is relatively fixed for both psycholinguistic (critical period effects) and sociolinguistic reasons (relative fixedness of social identity)”; Kerswill and Williams 2005: 1025). Views of this kind have been challenged. Variationist studies (Buchstaller 2016; Wagner 2012) have critically assessed rigid applications of a critical period hypothesis and recent research on the age factor in second-language acquisition has shown that “success” is a function of the overall language experience rather than biological maturation, irrespective of the age of the learner (Birdsong and Vanhove 2016; Muñoz and David Singleton 2011; Pfenninger and Singleton 2017).

Many of these studies refer to the six stages of Labov’s (1964: 91–93) developmental model for the acquisition of standard spoken English, which, though dated, still represents (to my knowledge at least) the only attempt to theorize the development of sociolinguistic competence through a variationist lens (see the discussion in Nardy et al. 2013: 257–265). Labov suggests that in a first stage (before age 5), children engage in the acquisition of “basic grammar” (Labov 1964: 91), which involves main grammatical rules as transmitted by parents and caretakers. The vernacular emerges in stage 2 (age 5–12), where children acquire the local dialect through contact with their peer group before developing an awareness of social significance vis-à-vis other dialects and beginning to form social evaluations similar to those of adults (stage 3: early adolescence). It is only in late adolescence (aged 16 years and older) that stylistic variation is acquired.

Accordingly, stylistic variation is acquired by children and adolescents when they are between ca. 14 and 18 years old (Labov 1964: 92–93). This is relevant for the present study given that Tristan da Cunha has such an unusual evolution history (see above). As none of the four speakers studied here had left the island until aged 50 or older, they had no compulsory schooling and only sporadic contact with outsiders speaking other forms of English. They were basically confined to the sociolinguistic patterns and norms of their own speech community for the most part of their lives. Though they clearly have some awareness of the usage of local and outside variables (otherwise the speakers would not have been able to vary in different contexts), our results suggest that they lack systematic context-related knowledge of *when and where* to vary. Consequently, one

could explain the result by pointing out that the four Tristan da Cunha English speakers, under these unusual circumstances at least, had not acquired the intricate patterns of variation and may in fact never have developed their variationist competence fully (at least with regard to context-sensitive variation, see below).

Put differently, their limited contact with outsiders speaking dialects other than their own (plus the combination of growing up and living in a community with extraordinarily dense and multiplex networks) means that they may not have mastered sociolinguistic competence (this is not at all to say that their repertoire is impoverished in any way, which is one of the most persistent stereotypes about isolated dialects; Schreier and Perez-Inofuentes 2014; see Bülow and Vergeiner this special issue). Of course, such an explanation would have to be checked (both with data from other Tristan da Cunha islanders, particularly those born after WWII, and third-age speakers from elsewhere); after all, Labov (1964: 92) suggests that the “ability to maintain standard styles of speech for any length of time is often not acquired at all”, claiming that it is “mostly middle-class speakers who have maximal awareness of a language’s social significance who fully develop such competence”, leaving open whether working-class speakers can attain such knowledge as well (and if so, under what circumstances).

For the time being it is not really possible to provide a conclusive answer as research on intra-individual variation across the lifespan is still in its infancy: “Results concerning the use of social dialects in adults are thus well established but the question of the acquisition of variable linguistic forms remains under-explored [...] In the sociolinguistic domain, the question of acquisition remains a nascent field” (Nardy et al. 2013: 257). In the absence of alternative research, the interpretation put forward here leaves much room for testing and critical discussion, in the hope that it will stimulate a broader approach toward sociolinguistic variation in third-age speakers.

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