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INVESTIGATING MEDIA INFLUENCE ON LANGUAGE CHANGE IN LOW-LEVEL SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIABLES

by

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ABSTRACT

This survey investigates the contentious issue of media influence on language change in variationist sociolinguistics, focusing on low-level variables – a distinction created to partition phonological and morphosyntactic variables into a category that emphasizes their deep level in the linguistic system. Works by influential researchers and well-respected names in the field are put in dialogue to determine what evidence for and against media influence is compelling and where gaps exist, incorporating work on global linguistic variants and phonological variant diffusion in places like Glasgow per Jane-Stuart Smith's controversial study. This discussion draws conclusions when possible, and ultimately comments on the limitations of existing frameworks in the task of assessing the influence of rapidly evolving media types on language change in the 21st century.

I. INTRODUCTION

The notion that media influences language change is often referenced by linguists as a commonly held lay-person belief akin to folk beliefs in other fields that are dismissed by researchers and easily refuted whenever entertained (Chambers 1998, Trudgill 2014). Whether this belief is as commonly held as many claim, its widespread dismissal as a valid area of inquiry has somewhat diminished in recent years, with a number fringe researchers and a few influential names giving more attention to the potential role of media in affecting the way that language features change within and between communities of speakers. Some of the earliest linguists to comment on the influence of media on language change were also some of the first to examine variation and change between social categories of speakers, the first wave sociolinguists of the 1960s and 1970s. They were quick to write off media influence, and their early conclusions stuck, shaping the opinions of researchers for years to come, and largely closing the door to the possibility of further research on media effects in sociolinguistics. However, media has changed drastically since the 1970s, and variationist sociolinguists of the 21st century are beginning to reimagine how research into media influence on language change might lead to new findings that diverge from the dominant opinions of the field.

Several terms must be defined before beginning a survey of media influence on language change in a sociolinguistic context. *Sociolinguistics* will be used in reference to the subfield of linguistics that evolved out of the regional dialectology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While regional dialectology involved mapping variation in language use between geographical regions, early sociolinguists were said to preform social dialectology, mapping language variation between major demographic categories such as socioeconomic class, race, sex, and age, as well as geographic locale, using these features to explain differences in spoken language,

rather than assuming they were due to free variation (Meyerhoff 2012). This naturally led to an interest in ongoing language change as it occurred between and among communities of speakers in real time, rather than historically, as is examined in the field of diachronic or historical linguistics.

Variationist sociolinguists will be the methodological approach and larger theoretical framework that this survey will take. Variationism is rooted in first wave sociolinguistics, concerned primarily with quantitatively examining variation and change in language variables between speech communities, using variants of language as explanatory variables and demographic categories or other community traits of speakers as response variables in statistical tests to draw conclusions about correlations between language use and community features in an experimental context. This approach differs from second and third wave sociolinguistics, which usually prefer ethnographic studies that seek explanations for language use that incorporate social factors such as group and individual identity construction, social networks, communities of practice, and speakers' perceptions of their selves and others. Variationist studies often target similar social factors but retain their quantitative methodologies and a strong emphasis on statistical and quantitative approaches rather than ethnographic ones (Tagliamonte 2011).

Taken at face value, *media influence* seems to allude to a vague power that media exerts on language users, independent of their own agency, manipulating their language use in any number of ways. If this were all that was meant by media influence, it would be obvious why sociolinguists would push against the phenomenon acting on language change. Case in point, claiming that English-speaking "TV makes people sound the same" is certainly not the case, as J.K. Chambers argues in his 1998 chapter which will be explored further later in this survey (Chambers 1998). Moving beyond lackluster definitions of media influence can result in

compelling ideas of the term that can guide studies that are able to try in earnest to explore the topic in novel ways that may yield useful results. Jane Stuart-Smith, an influential researcher in this area whose name and work will saturate this survey, summed up her understanding of the term as follows:

> I understand media influence as a broad concept encompassing a range of relationships and processes. Standing back, media influence can refer to the numerous relationships between different aspects of language presented in the media, the appearance of similar elements in community language, and psychological engagement with those media, alongside other social factors which are likely to include interpersonal contact within and without the community. Moving closer, it can also refer to the processes entailed by speakers whilst engaging with broadcast media, which – given that spoken language comprises continual loops of perception and production – we would expect to be strongly constrained by personal experience of linguistic interaction (Stuart-Smith 2014: 251).

Per this definition, media influence does not involve media acting on language users in a vacuum, but rather within a matrix of social and linguistic influences that look similar to what would be observed as variables in any other variationist study. Media influence is much more than a process occurring passively as a speakers consume media. It is not a phenomenon concerning "the media somehow doing things to the viewer" but rather one in which "the viewers… are doing things with the media" in ways "constrained by their existing linguistic, social, and ideological knowledge, and usually without any overt awareness that anything might be happening" (Stuart Smith 2011: 223). Unfortunately for the purposes of this study, the majority of research on media influence in variationist sociolinguistics thus far has been limited to examination of television programs, as they have been the most commonly available form of

media since the early days of sociolinguistics as a discipline. The repercussions of this limitation in a world saturated by new and evolving media types will be discussed in the final section.

Language change is broad term that needs further narrowing down, as each subfield of linguistics uses it somewhat differently. The two major types of language change discussed in the field of sociolinguistics are transmission and diffusion. The difference between the two lies in how a change enters a community and from where a novel variant of an existing language variable originates. Transmission comes from within a speech community, as young speakers reinterpret language features adopted from their parents or elders and is for this reason often referred to as change from below. Diffusion results from mobile speakers moving between communities and spreading language features and is often called change from above (Labov 2007). Diffusing changes would be the type to be influenced by media, as the media enters a community from above, broadcasting language features from another geographic area. Language change also involves aspects of conscious awareness. Diffusion is held as a process naturally resulting from sociolinguistic founding father William Labov's principle of density, which holds that diffusion is a result of density of communication, or who interacts with who most often (Labov 2001). This involves processes hosted beneath the level of a speaker's conscious awareness, as speakers unconsciously adopt linguistic features from their interlocutors through face-to-face interaction. Many researchers hold that the media cannot reach this depth to truly alter language at the structural level, besides in the realm of words and phrases. This issue will be expounded upon later in the survey, as will the idea of independent development through drift as a competing model to conventional diffusion in the context of media influence. Additionally, the notions of 'off the shelf' and 'under the counter' changes will be discussed, per Eckert (2003) and Milroy (2007), respectively.

Lastly, *sociolinguistic variables* are spoken language features that vary between speech communities. They are generally divided into five categories: lexical variables, pragmatic/semantic variables, phonological variables, morphosyntactic variables, and tense/aspect variables (Taglimonte 2011). For the purposes of this survey, lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic variable types will be examined, as they are the main types observed in studies of media influence on language change. Lexical variables are vocabulary features that differ between speech communities. A common example known by most laypeople is the distinction of "soda" and "pop" that exists between the North American West and East for the sparkling fountain drink of many flavors. Phonological variables are pronunciation features that differ between communities. A famous example can be found in William Labov's Martha's Vineyard study, where he targeted the variants [ai] – the standard mainland realization of the vowel phoneme in the word 'price' – and [ei] – the variant used in the same environment by many year-round Vineyard residents (Labov 1972). Morphosyntactic variables are grammatical features prone to variation and change, such as adverbial *-ly*, which varies between use and omission in favor of the zero variant in utterances such as "they need it *quick* and they don't care how" (Tagliamonte 2011). Studying such variables and their variants allows sociolinguists to make conclusions about the social and linguistic constraints governing language variation and change between speech communities, as it is assumed that variants index social meaning (Labov's Vineyarders unconsciously distinguish themselves from part-time residents and vacationers to the island through their use of traditional variants) and linguistic conditions for use.

This survey will distinguish between high-level and low-level variable types – fabricated distinctions meant to highlight the level of conscious awareness believed to be involved in

adopting a language feature and the depth in the linguistic system that certain features are believed to occupy. High-level variables will refer to lexical and discourse variables, traditionally thought to be adopted from media consciously, while low-level variables will refer to phonological and morphosyntactic variables, believed to inhabit a lower level of the linguistic system, and thus traditionally believed to require face-to-face interaction to facilitate unconscious adoption. However, both definitions will be complicated by discussions of findings and opinions of researchers. They serve only as starting categorizations to guide inquiry. Per its title, the focus of this survey will be low-level variables due to the contention surrounding the media's ability to influence changes in these variable types. Overall, this survey will lay out findings and discussions on the topic of media influence in an attempt to reach a consensus about the ability of media to influence language change on a low level and will conclude by exploring new ways forward in this area of research.

II. HIGH-LEVEL VARIABLES

Much of the dismissal of the ability of media to influence language change in low-level variables arises from the common notion that the media can easily introduce high-level lexical changes and therefore can solely operate on this level. By examining discourse about these variables, some of the main arguments against media influence on low level variables will begin to take shape. As was established in this survey's introduction, some of the only studies concerning media and language change come from investigations of television, as this was the main media type available for research in the 1960s and 1970s, when early influential work in sociolinguistics was being done.

The previously referenced work of Chambers (1998) represents a summation of majority opinions of sociolinguists regarding the media and language change. His chapter, entitled "TV

Makes People Sound the Same", can be found in the book *Language Myths*, edited by another influential early sociolinguist, Peter Trudgill. Chambers (1998) discusses the media's diffusion of vocabulary items, and more specifically catchphrases. His examples include 'Ya-ba da-ba doo' from the cartoon television program *The Flintstones* and the addition of '- NOT!' onto the end of positive declarative statements, gleaned from the American sketch comedy program *Saturday Night Live* (Chambers 1998:125). Beyond the fact that his examples are intended for a lay audience like the book they reside in, their somewhat tongue and cheek nature highlights the dismissive feelings he – and by proxy Trudgill – holds toward the idea that media could influence anything outside the realm of such humorous examples. These catchphrases fade out of community vocabularies at the rate of slang terms and are both used and recognized at the conscious level by interlocuters, functioning more as explicit references than actual changes to language system or even the lexicon of speakers. The diffusion of more true-to-form lexical variables from television is likewise acknowledged throughout sociolinguistic research, such as by Trudgill (2014) who recalls "acquiring American words like *campus* and *freshman* in the 1960s, without ever having visited the U.S.A" (Trudgill 2014).

In response to Sayers (2014) – a controversial piece this survey will return to – Trudgill (2014) emphasizes that the field of sociolinguistics has always accepted the media's ability to diffuse higher level lexical items, and thus considering the influence of the media is in no way a departure from sociolinguistic convention. Trudgill (2014) only emphasizes – as Chambers (1998) and others do as well – that higher level changes are short lived fads and thus do not represent changes to the deeper structure of a language. They reside above the level of conscious awareness and involve speakers making decisions about which features to adopt and incorporate in speech, which runs contrary to true diffusion as posited by Labov (2001), which occurs below

the level of conscious awareness as a result of the principle of density. Speakers can choose to incorporate a word or phrase that they hear, but diffusion of an innovative phonological or morphosyntactic variant necessarily occurs without any input from a speaker. Per the principle of density, this occurs due to speakers interacting with one another face-to-face, and this is a cornerstone of the argument against low-level variable diffusion being able to be influenced by media. Diffusion that changes the deeper language system relies on face-to-face interaction between interlocutors, and this is not possible through television. One does not have a conversation with their television set, and if they do it is certainly not a two-way conversation in which they receive the novel and tailored responses they would from a live interlocutor.

III. 'LOW-LEVEL' VARIABLES

Chambers (1998) discusses language acquisition as another line of evidence for media being unable to influence the diffusion of low-level linguistic features. The bulk of findings in language acquisition research in linguistics and psycholinguistics have shown that hearing children in deaf families cannot learn to speak through television or radio assistance but must do so through speaking with others. Ervin-Tripp (1973) found that these children must be spoken to by other people, while Todd and Aitchison (1980) followed a specific case in which a hearing boy was encouraged by his deaf parents to watch television to acquire spoken language after learning signed language, but was unable to, and ended up with an impaired capacity for acquiring speech and almost no passive skills gleaned through television. The lack of evidence for television facilitating language acquisition can be extended, in the view of some of some sociolinguists, to be a lack of evidence for media diffusing low-level sociolinguistic variants, as each process involves a deep internalizing of linguistic structures into the brain.

Discourse in favor of the possibility of the media exerting influence on low-level variables is usually divided into two central arguments. The first is global innovations or global linguistic variants. These are changes in phonology or morphosyntax that are observed in discontinuous geographic settings across the world. Most examples involve simultaneous changes occurring in English speaking communities in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. The crux of the argument is that such global changes could not have arisen as quickly as they did from speaker contact alone, and thus were spread via the assistance of global media such as television and the internet. The second central argument about the media and low-level variables comes from a small number of studies on television and phonological changes. The most cited of these is an influential study of diffusing phonological changes in Glasgow, Scotland, carried out by Jane Stuart-Smith and fellow researchers. Their statistical modeling of variant use versus several social, linguistic, and media engagement factors in Glaswegian speakers showed correlation between use of innovative phonological variants and strong psychological engagement with English television programs that used the variants. This suggested that when viewers engaged with media at a psychologically intense level, the media language had some quantifiable effect on their use of variants, alongside other factors. Both central arguments will be explored in depth to determine if they are compelling evidence for the media's ability to influence changing language.

A. GLOBAL INNOVATIONS

Global innovations, or global linguistic variants, are linguistic innovations occurring simultaneously in distant locations across the world (Buchstaller 2008, Sayers 2014). The preeminent example is the quotative *be like,* found in English speaking communities across hemispheres, and seen in such utterances as "I *was like,* 'Oh no!'" (Tagliamonte 2014). Sayers

(2014) and others view the diffusion of *be like* and other global variants as a line of evidence for the media's influence on language change, as it is thought that only global media could carry such innovations to the disparate communities where they are observed. However, Sayers (2014) does make the necessary caveats to an argument positing media influence with *be like* and other global innovations as lines of evidence.

His first caveat is the question of whether global innovations are more than superficial and temporary changes, and truly represent alterations to the internal structure of the language system. Before using a variant such as *be like* as evidence supporting the notion that the media can influence low-level variables, it must first be established beyond doubt that *be like* is indeed a complex, low-level variant. This survey has previously distinguished between high-level and low-level variables through the partitioning of lexical variables from phonological and morphosyntactic variables. At first glance, *be like* appears grammatical, making it a morphosyntactic feature, but some like Trudgill (2014) disagree, saying "replacing *said* with *was like* or *went* is no less lexical than replacing *wireless* with *radio* or *clever* with *smart*" (Trudgill 2014: 215). He sees true grammatical innovation as resembling the ongoing changes occurring with stative and dynamic *have* and *have got*, observed in Tagliamonte (2003). However, Buchstaller (2006) and Tagliamonte and D'Arcy (2004) argue that *be like* is a core grammatical feature, and part of a quotative system that operates on a lower level of language structure than lexical variables.

Even if one moves forward on the assumption that *be like* is a morphosyntactic feature rather than a lexical one, the matter is further complicated by the fact that this survey previously partitioned lexical variables into the category of high-level superficial features and morphosyntactic and phonological variables into low-level complex features, but this was

somewhat of an oversimplification. Sociolinguists have held that a variable's status as a morphosyntactic or phonological feature does not fully exempt it from being involved in superficial rather than low-level, complex change. Here is where Eckert's (2003) notion of 'off the shelf' changes comes into play. She says:

> We have all been told by non-linguist acquaintances that language change comes from the television. The idea that language change could be accomplished in such a trivial fashion is part of the popular 'bag o' words' view of language… that we're all tired of dealing with. However, we shouldn't ignore the possibility that not all changes are equal. We need to ask ourselves what kinds of changes require the kind of repeated exposure that regular social interaction gives, and what kinds can be taken right off the shelf (Eckert 2003: 395).

This often-cited quote demonstrates the growing view in sociolinguistics that certain grammatical and pronunciation changes can arise from media in a superficial manner as lexical variables do. In discussing changes taking place in England, Milroy (2007) coined 'under the counter' changes as an antithesis to 'off the shelf' changes. 'Under the counter' changes are complex changes spread through traditional diffusion involving face-to-face interaction between interlocuters. Milroy (2007) categorizes *be like* as an 'off the shelf' change, but Sayers (2014) is not convinced. He sees Buchstaller (2006) and Tagliamonte and D'Arcy (2004) classification of the variant as a complex, systemic feature to be proof of its 'under the counter' nature, and its process of arising in geographically disparate communities without the face-to-face interaction to be evidence for the media's ability to diffuse low-level variants globally. Of course, Trudgill (2014) and the many others hold that the change is in fact superficial and 'off the shelf'. Therefore, regarding the introduction of *be like*, they hold that "it is no different from lexical

changes… there is nothing mysterious about it. The media were necessarily involved", but it is not evidence for the ability of the media to operate on lower-level language features (Trudgill 2014: 217).

Sayers' (2014) second caveat comes in the form of acknowledging that it is unknown whether *be like* will be a long-lasting change or merely a fad due to its brief history. Trudgill (2014) unsurprisingly considers it a fad in line with his other views on the superficial nature of the change, but according to Sayers (2014) and others it is still too soon to tell. Tagliamonte (2014) acknowledges how the variant is unique in many regards, not only in the sense that "its patterns of use are complex, globally diffused and… consistently deployed at least in the English-speaking world", but also in the fact that its short history displays "high speed acceleration" when compared to the historical patterns of similar quotatives (Tagliamonte 2014: 225). Indeed, D'Arcy (2012) finds that *be like*'s frequency of use in New Zealand greatly surpasses the rising and falling numbers of other quotatives such as *think, go,* and *zero* when it enters the language in the 1970s and 1980s. It remains to be seen whether this rapid acceleration indicates a long-lasting change or simply an extreme example of a short-term variant entering a community and making an impact.

Before drawing any conclusions on *be like,* and global innovations in general, it is important to consider what Sali A. Tagliamonte, a leading researcher on the variant, thinks of its diffusion and what it could suggest about media influence. Her work with Rodrigues-Louro and D'Arcy (2013) allowed for a tracing of the history of the variant in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, finding that it originated in speakers born in the 1970s, and its use continued to rapidly increase in those born in the 80s. If media introduced this variant, it must have been used in the television programs of the time, but Dion and Poplack (2007) found it entirely absent when they

surveyed popular television shows of these decades. This was in line with the findings of Tagliamonte and Roberts' (2005) *Friends* study, which showed television language modeling spoken language, rather than spoken language imitating what is heard in media. This fits with many other findings such as that of Chambers (1998), whose work on the shift from the traditional Canadian *dived* to the United States variant *dove* in southern Ontario, Canada found that although the entrance of the new past tense variant *dove* correlated with the media explosion of the late 1960s, and the Canadian airwaves were saturated with American television programs, media influence could not be assumed because *dive* was not a common enough word for its past tense American English variant to occur in media frequently enough to make a mark on Canadians. Chambers (1998) holds that global changes are possible because the modern age is not only characterized by the media explosion, but also by high mobility, allowing speakers to travel more than ever and therefore more easily interact with one another, enabling language change to take place in the face-to-face manner that he sees as crucial to the diffusion of changes. As to how *be like* arose and spread, Tagliamonte (2014) takes a similar stance, stating that "the internal linguistic system was already changing to permit a novel form to enter and the sociocultural pathways were in place for global diffusion" – something she rightly acknowledges is not "an entirely satisfying explanation", but holds up better than the media argument (Tagliamonte 2014: 226).

After Tagliamonte's own dismissal of the media's influence in diffusing the change, she spent years studying, and the opposition of Trudgill, Milroy, Eckert, and Chambers, Sayers's (2014) use of *be like* as a line of evidence for the media's ability to diffuse low-level variants finds itself on unsure footing. The question as to whether the dismissal of *be like* should result in the writing off of all global innovations remains. Interestingly, Tagliamonte (2014) notes that *be*

like might be the only truly global variant, begging the question as to why so few others are confirmed to exist despite the vast reach of global media, which would intuitively result in the diffusion of numerous worldwide variants if the phenomenon was possible. Even Sayers (2014), an advocate for their legitimacy, admits the works that suggest their origin in the media – such as Buchstaller and D'Arcy (2009) – to be examples of the rhetorical device *proof surrogate*, in which media influence is implied or suggested but never adequately evidenced. With all of this in mind, it is safe to conclude that global variants are far from the evidence for the media's ability to influence language change. Too much remains to be seen about their longevity, their true place in the linguistic system of English, and their continued status as anomalies.

B. GLASGOW STUDY AND PHONOLOGICAL CHANGE

The work of Jane Stuart-Smith and colleagues in Stuart-Smith et al. (2013) represents a counterpoint to the commonly held beliefs about media influence on low-level variables that has both statistical evidence and a novel research methodology. The work tracked two phonological changes taking place in Glasgow, Scotland involving the acceleration of the spread of southern British phonological variants originating in London into the Glaswegian sound system that were hypothesized to have a connection to the influence of British soap operas over Glaswegian teenagers. They acknowledge the reservations of the field concerning media influence on language change but note two possible situations of exception: the standardization of regional dialects, and rapidly diffusing changes. Rapidly diffusing changes are characterized by influence from the community grammar, and thus are constrained by certain linguistic factors and by their role in carrying social meaning, and thus are likewise influenced by social factors, one of which could be media engagement. Additionally, these changes often involve variants that are geographically separated from their source. The two main phonological changes taking place in

Glasgow could thus be influenced by media factors, as Glasgow and south England are isolated from each other due to their great distance, and the young speakers leading the changes in Glasgow were thought to be mostly low mobility teenagers without much contact with England.

The two variables examined were TH-fronting – the use of [f] for /θ/ in words like *think* becoming *[f]ink* – and L-vocalization – the vocalization of coda /l/ in words like *milk* and *people* (Stuart-Smith et al. 2013, p. 501). These changes had been present in Glasgow for over a decade but were gaining momentum in the years prior to the work of the researchers, allowing for researchers to hypothesize that these changes were being accelerated by exposure to British television. The main program in question was *EastEnders*, a London-based soap opera watched by nearly one third of the population of the United Kingdom each week at the time of the study, in which characters spoke what researchers call media cockney, an artificial but roughly true to life London accent produced by actors (Stuart-Smith et al. 2013). To determine whether engagement with *EastEnders* influenced the acquisition of the Glaswegian variants, researchers collected recordings of spontaneous conversations and word list readings to simulate both casual and formal speech. Additionally, participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their demographic, social, attitudinal, and media engagement information. After data collection, researchers performed statistical analyses on the use of innovative variants against the social, linguistic, and media engagement factors gathered to determine which exerted the greatest influence on the use of innovative variants, which factors were correlated, and what this revealed about media influence.

The social factors of interest were divided into eight categories: dialect contact, attitudes, social practices, television, music, film, computers, and sports. Dialect contact included numerous variables concerning the location of a speaker's family and friends within and outside

Glasgow, how often a speaker interacted with them in person or over the phone, and variables indicating the mobility of the speaker in Glasgow and other cities. The researchers found that participants were quite local, rarely traveled, and mainly had direct contact with outsiders from the north of England, if at all. Attitude was a factor measuring feelings towards dialects outside of Glasgow, which found that many speakers reported disliking London accents. Social practices involved the number of friends a speaker reported, their attitude toward school, their habits of going out on weekend nights, and their choice of clothing. Television factors included variables assessing engagement with television such as how much exposure a speaker had to television and how deeply they interacted with *EastEnders* psychologically in ways including choosing favorite characters, discussing the plots and lives of these characters with others in daily life, and reported attachment to the characters and the plot. Television exposure was reported at an average three hours per day, with *EastEnders* being the most chosen favorite program. Music, computers, film, and sports each assessed how often speakers engaged in these activities (Stuart-Smith et al. 2013).

Results of logistic regression modeling of collected data revealed that in the reading of wordlists for TH-fronting, use of [f] was positively correlated with social practices first, then engagement with television, then dialect contact, and finally with attitudes towards accents. For TH-fronting in conversational settings, use of [f] was determined most strongly by word position, specifically occurring most in word final positions. Engagement with television was the only other significant positive effect. For L-vocalization in wordlists, the strongest factor was social practices, then the linguistic factor of /l/ being less likely to occur in preconsonantal positions (*milk)*, then engagement with television, and finally dialect contact. In conversational settings, use of /l/ was most strongly predicted by presence in a postconsonantal position

(*people)*, then by social practices, and lastly by engagement with television. These findings demonstrate that linguistic constraints were strong predictors, but social factors were important as well, as significant positive effects were shown by practices such as adherence to school uniform, psychological engagement with *EastEnders*, and contact with friends and family in England, if a speaker had any (Stuart-Smith et al. 2013).

Sayers (2014) views these findings as compelling evidence for media influence on language change and sees the study as an exemplar of his 'mediated innovation model', designed to encourage variationist sociolinguists to interrogate media influence through the incorporation of methodologies originating in media effects research. The Glasgow study certainly does this exceedingly well through cross examination of linguistic detail and media engagement practice and has been hailed by many as "ground breaking in design, implementation, methods, and analytic techniques", but nevertheless "slippery" in its results (Tagliamonte 2014: 226). Indeed, while they align with findings from those like Naro (1981), who found that syntactic changes in Brazilian Portuguese were significantly correlated with exposure to soap operas, and Lameli (2004) and Muhr (2003) who each argued that changes in the German dialects they examined were taking place as a result of exposure to radio broadcasting and German television programs in Austria, respectively, they differ from the results of other similar studies. Among them are Carvalho (2004), who found that innovative phonological variants in Uruguayan Portuguese had no correlation to the viewing of television shows in Brazilian Portuguese even though participants reported desired emulation of the language in these shows, and Saladino (1990), who found that television was not a factor in the standardization of certain southern Italian dialects. Thus, one must dive deeper into the implications of the study's findings and the resulting counter

arguments from across the variationist landscape in order to gain better insight into what the Glasgow study revealed.

The counter arguments are many and summed up by Trudgilll (2014). Unlike Milroy (2007), who views the phonological changes in Glasgow as 'off the shelf' in nature, both Meyerhoff and Niedzielski (2003) and Trudgill (2003) acknowledge the complexity in the variables but use the phenomenon of independent development to explain how the changes entered Glasgow. Independent development is an alternative model to diffusion that posits an identical change could occur in two separate places and times without being an example of diffusion. Independent development arises through drift, a fundamental concept to language change research and historical linguistics. Trudgill (2014) quotes linguistic founding father Sapir (1921), who states

> languages long disconnected will pass through the same of strikingly similar phases meaning that language varieties may resemble one another because, having derived from some common source, they continue to evolve linguistically in similar directions as a result of similar changes. They… have inherited a shared *propensity* to the development of the same characteristics, even after separation (Sapir 1921: 150, Trudgill 2014: 217).

Drift then allows for independent development to take place, especially in changes that are common. For the Glasgow changes, L-vocalization is such an example "which is always waiting to happen", having occurred in French, Italian, and German in the past (Trudgill 2014: 217). TH-fronting is common as well, but cannot be called independent development in British English, as its conventional diffusion through the country from London is mapped by Kerswill (2003). This gradual geographic diffusion can be viewed evidence that the media is not involved in Glasgow, as "media influence would have led to more or less simultaneous innovation

nationwide" (Trudgill 2014: 218). Overall, Trudgill (2014) firmly rejects any media influence in the realm of diffusion, and others like Tagliamonte (2014) are given pause by the fact that "media influence was captured only when individuals reported that *EastEnders* was their favorite show and that they engaged with it psychologically…" suggesting that "watching television is not a casual effect, but indirect, one of many other factors contributing to the acceleration of an already diffusing linguistic feature" (Tagliamonte 2014: 227).

As damning as they may seem, Trudgill (2014) and Tagliamonte's (2014) concerns about the Glasgow findings are in line with the viewpoints of the original researchers, but in the context of the goals of the study they are not major problems, but rather ways of reaching toward a fitting conclusion. Regarding the concern about media being an indirect effect only, Stuart-Smith (2014) reminds others that the starting assumption of the study was that media exposure or engagement could be factor alongside others, but never that media was thought to be the sole casual factor behind the changes. In the end, analyses showed that linguistic factors were usually the most significant effects, while social factors like street style came next, followed by psychological engagement with *EastEnders*, and dialect contact lastly. Regarding the concern from Trudgill (2014) about the genesis of the innovations arising from independent development and geographic diffusion, the original report notes the presence of the changes in the community years prior to the study, and Stuart-Smith (2014) emphasizes that Glaswegians used the variants more frequently than the characters in *EastEnders*, and with differing social and linguistic constraints, suggesting that patterns of use in Glasgow were determined by existing local variation. The major takeaway of the study was thus that findings suggested media engagement played a distinct and statistically significant role in the acceleration of phonological changes in

Glasgow, but only alongside linguistic facts, participation in certain social practices, and less intensely dialect contact with relatives and friends in England (Stuart-Smith 2014).

Trudgill (1986) theorizes a 'softening-up' process by which changes brought into communities through traditional diffusion could be accelerated by positive attitudes toward standard accents demonstrated on television, and despite fully rejecting diffusion through media, he leaves the door open for such a softening-up phenomenon in the case of Glasgow, but notes he sees it as only speculation "perhaps worth investigating" (Trudgill 2014: 220). In truth, his traditional theory of softening-up does not hold in Glasgow, as positive attitudes toward London based programs were not correlated with positive attitudes toward London accents (Stuart-Smith 2014). Fans of *EastEnders* did not frequently report a favorable opinion on London accents, despite beginning to incorporate features of such accents in their use of innovative variants from England. This highlights two things. Firstly, it rejects Trudgill's (1986) initial idea of softening-up having to do with attitude. The implication behind the theory is that speakers who look favorably on an accent and will be led to use variants of an ongoing change at a quicker pace, implying a conscious choice similar to traditional ideas about the media's ability to influence high-level variables due to their status as above the level of conscious awareness. What the Glasgow study alternatively shows is that phonological changes are being accelerated in part by the media independently of attitude toward accents, and thus beneath the level of conscious awareness. As for the underlying mechanism of this acceleration, more research must be done, but Stuart-Smith (2014) notes that media influence in Glasgow takes the form of "the effective enhancement of existing variation… media may act as another means of enabling existing or latent variation to 'bubble up' into changes" (Stuart-Smith 2014: 257). Thus, the important findings are established and are able to be summarized: Glasgow does not provide nor does it

intend to provide evidence for the media's ability to introduce low-level changes; Glasgow does not present nor does it intend to present media influence as the sole causal factor behind ongoing low-level changes in Glasgow; true psychological engagement with media through practices that extend beyond simple exposure to television – including caring about the stories of characters and discussing plots in daily life – influences the acceleration of ongoing phonological changes alongside linguistic and social factors at a statistically significant level, suggesting the ability of media engagement to act on low-level linguistic processes.

IV. CONCLUSION

Arriving at a conclusion for as contentious and complicated an issue as media influence on low-level language change is no small task. However, what is abundantly clear is that more work needs to be done. While traditional ideas about the media and low-level language change are often true (the media does not seem to be able to introduce changes, only possibly assist in the speed of their diffusion), the work of Stuart-Smith et al. (2013) and others like Naro (1981), Lameli (2004), and Muhr (2003) make it clear that in order to find meaningful results, variationist researchers must built more robust and multivariate statistical models that consider variables previously ignored such as psychological engagement with media, while also comparing these against the linguistic and social factors that would normally be examined in any other study, and produce real evidence for influence rather than inferring it. Additionally, media influence must be taken seriously as more than mere exposure to media, but rather a complex process in which speakers interact with media rather than passively consume it.

Researchers must also reach beyond variationist methodologies and into other fields like interactional sociolinguistics and media effects research in order to build studies that have a fighting chance at reaching novel results and keeping up with rapidly changing media types and

habits of media engagement in the 21st century (Androutsopoulos 2014, Gunter 2014). Indeed, the most interesting findings of coming years must extend beyond television for their evidence. Tagliamonte (2014) notes that in recent years even this form of media has become increasingly interactive and no longer the arena for passive entertainment that early variationists dismissed as unable to influence the language a viewer. The rise of the internet, social media, and various other forms of new media such as augmented and virtual reality are further testaments not only to the idea that "whatever is going on with media and language, it is developing faster than [researchers] can imagine and it is highly differentiated in particular ways to specific times and places", but also that humans have an increasingly vested interest in Stuart-Smith's (2011) idea of "doing things with media" (Tagliamonte 2014: 228).

Reaching beyond traditional media types and variationist methodologies can also free researchers them the presuppositions about the irrelevance of media influence that have existed in variationist sociolinguistics since the early years of the field and allow them to move toward meaningful methodologies that may yield new results. Even if these new findings show that low-level changes are not significantly influenced by media engagement, they will be useful in the fact that they contribute to the growing the pool of research and do so through methodologies that can be better trusted to be consider the full scope of possible effects, rather than a limited framework that ignores media effects. Much work remains to be done, but the hope should be that a survey of this kind may be written on the same topic in the coming years and have an abundance of new evidence, whether it be for or against media influence.

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APPENDIX

In the context of the larger ideas of honors liberal arts education at Seattle Pacific University that seek to comment on ‘what it means to be human’, my research in the field of sociolinguistics sheds light on the question of how social and academic structures limit opportunities and suppress voices in several ways. My findings concerning media influence on low-level language change inform our panel’s response to the issue of structures and suppression by demonstrating that common disciplinary frameworks for researching key issues are often limited in their ability to produce useful results without incorporating methodologies and approaches from other fields and disciplines. Additionally, dominant voices from influential researchers may drown out the findings and opinions of fringe names whose work has value, nevertheless. Overall, researchers must extend themselves beyond the academic structures that hold them if they desire to achieve novel conclusions on topics of nuance and fast paced change, and the same holds for humans and societies in general.

Before briefly sharing my research findings, it would be beneficial to break down the component parts of my project’s title. By media influence on language change I refer not to the rightly contested belief that media like television exerts a vague power over passive viewers that can modify their language use, but rather the nuanced idea that language in media can interact with community language through speaker engagement with media within the context of cooccurring linguistic, social, and psychological factors. Therefore, the term media influence on language change has less to do with “the media somehow doing things to the viewer” and more to do with “the viewers… doing things with the media”, in the words of researcher Jane Stuart-Smith (2011:223).

By language change, I refer specifically to the concept of Labovian diffusion, in which varying language features called linguistic variants enter community grammars from above, introduced by outside mobile individuals bringing language features from elsewhere. Diffusion occurs through sociolinguistic founding father William Labov's principle of density – the idea that the adoption of language features is a result of who interacts with who the most, as speakers subconsciously adopt diffusing variants during face-to-face conversation with those around them.

These variants are differing forms of sociolinguistic variables, the last part of my title. Sociolinguistic variables are language features that are prone to vary and change between speech communities. They are essential to the core idea of sociolinguistics – that differences in spoken language are not the result of free variation, but are instead systematic and can be traced back to patterns of use related to major demographic categories such as age, race, socioeconomic class, sex and/or gender, and regional location. Variants are also believed to index social meaning, related to group and individual identity construction, and speakers' perceptions of themselves and others within social networks and communities of practice. My research mainly concerns two variable types: phonological variables, or pronunciation features, and morphosyntactic variables, or grammatical features, as they are the main variables examined in studies of media influence on language change. I designate these variable types as 'low-level' to indicate their status as features believed to be part of the lower-level linguistic structure of community grammars, and their need for unconscious adoption through Labovian diffusion in order to enter a community, as opposed to higher level features such as lexical variables, which are vocabulary items that have long been accepted to be able to be picked up from media consciously.

To investigate media influence I looked into research from variationist sociolinguistics, an approach to the field concerned primarily with quantitatively examining variation and change in language features using variants of language as predictor variables and demographic categories or other community traits as response variables in statistical tests intended to draw conclusions about correlations between language use and community features. Variationists have done the majority of the work on media and language in sociolinguistics, but it will be seen that their approach is fundamentally limited in its ability to effectively interrogate the question of media influence.

Traditionally, influence of the media was written off in sociolinguistics, as influential early researchers such as William Labov, Peter Trudgill, J.K. Chambers, and James and Lesley Milroy rejected the ability of television to diffuse any features besides lexical variants – usually catchphrases or slang terms from popular television shows, or American English words entering the United Kingdom and replacing U.K. variants of the same variables, for example. These high-level variables were able to be adopted from media consciously in the same way that one might learn and begin to use a word from a dictionary, while phonological and morphosyntactic features were always believed to require face-to-face speaker interaction to be adopted, and because television does not provide true interaction, it could not lead to unconscious adoption of lower-level features. Early sociolinguists would cite research from first language acquisition and psycholinguistic studies like those by Todd and Aitchison and by Ervin-Tripp, who each showed how hearing children born to deaf parents were unable to learn language through exposure to television. The process of first language acquisition is similar to that of diffusion in sociolinguistics, as both involve language features being adopted unconsciously, so

sociolinguists use this as evidence against the media's ability to diffuse language variants and thus influence changes.

I found that there are traditionally two major lines of evidence used in support of media's ability to diffuse or influence the diffusion of low-level variables in a landscape of dissenting voices that has long rejected the media's ability to touch low-level language. These are that of global innovations, also called global linguistic variants, and phonological changes occurring in places like Glasgow that were shown to be influenced by media engagement in speakers.

Global linguistic variants are changes occurring simultaneously in geographically separate speech communities of the same language across the world. The most cited example is that of quotative *be like*, used in place of other variants such as *said* and *go*. Researchers such as Tagliamonte, Buchstaller, and D'Arcy have tracked the morphosyntactic variable's development in North America, Europe, and Australia and New Zealand, noting its rapid spread in such disconnected communities, leading many to conclude that its rise could not have come about from speaker travel alone, but also through media like television and the internet. However, some argue that *be like* is not actually a low-level variable, but instead a high-level lexical one, like Trudgill, who says "replacing *said* with *was like* or *went* is no less lexical than replacing wireless with radio or clever with smart" (Trudgill 2014: 215). Even for those who believe that *be like* is morphosyntactic and low-level, the issue is complicated by Penelope Eckert's idea of 'off the shelf changes', low-level variable changes that do not require "the kind of repeated exposure that regular social interaction gives… and… can be taken right off the shelf", metaphorically (Eckert 2003:395). Eckert and Leslie Milroy, among others, believe that be like is an example of such an 'off the shelf' change, low-level in appearance, but not complicated

enough to suggest the media's ability to influence the deep structure of linguistic systems, much like how lexical variables can be diffused easily through television.

Even those who studied *be like* the closest doubt its ability to support the media influence argument. Tagliamonte, Rodrigues-Louro, and D'Arcy pinpointed the beginnings of the variant to the generation born in the 1970s. From there it would hold that if media were involved, the variant would be found in television programs of the time, but researchers Dion and Poplack found it entirely absent from Canadian television, even as use of the variant grew exponentially in the country. Tagliamonte therefore suggests that "the internal linguistic system was already changing to permit a novel form to enter and the sociocultural pathways were in place for global diffusion" – something she rightly acknowledges is not "an entirely satisfying explanation", but holds up better than the media argument. J.K. Chambers and others agree, noting that 1960s and 70s were not only the time of the media explosion, but also a growth in high global mobility, allowing speakers to travel more than ever before and thus spread variants further afield. In terms of global variants overall, Tagliamonte interestingly notes that *be like* might be the only truly global variant, begging the question as to why so few others are confirmed to exist despite the vast reach of global media, which would intuitively result in the diffusion of numerous worldwide variants if the phenomenon were possible.

While global innovations are a rather weak line of evidence, phonological changes in Glasgow, studied by Jane Stuart-Smith and colleagues, provide some of the only truly compelling evidence for media influencing the diffusion of low-level variants to date. The study's revolutionary methodology incorporated media effects research approaches from collaborator Barrie Gunter, allowing the results to show a statistically significant involvement

from the media, not a proof surrogate argument, in which media influence is suggested but never truly evidenced, as in the case of global variants.

The Glasgow study involved two diffusing phonological changes originating in southern England and increasing in use among Glaswegian teenagers, believed to be influenced by the incredibly popular London based soap opera *EastEnders*, watched by a third of the United Kingdom's population each week during the time of the study. To determine whether the changes were influenced by the program, speakers were surveyed not only on their language use and social practices, as is customary, but also on their media engagement practices. Results from statistical modeling showed that a high level of media engagement, included behaviors like picking favorite characters and discussing the plots and lives of the characters daily, was correlated to a high frequency of use of the variants, alongside linguistic and social constraints as well, such as position of the sounds within a word, and social practices related to Glasgow street style and school attendance.

However, Trudgill and otehres argued against these findings, suggesting that L-vocalization is an example of independent development, an alternative model to diffusion that posits an identical change could occur in two separate places and times due to dialects or languages sharing a propensity to the development of certain common changes, like L-vocalization, which has occurred in many languages over time. Trudgill also argues that studies like that of Kerswill show TH-fronting making its way across the UK from London over the decades through conventional geographic diffusion. However, these concerns are not true counterarguments to the findings of Stuart-Smith in Glasgow, as the original researchers note that the variants existed in the city before *EastEnders* entered the air waves. What their research findings comment on is not the ability of media to introduce diffusing variants, as some argue in

the case of *be like*, but rather the ability of media to influence the speed of acceleration of diffusing changes when true psychological engagement with media is present. The Glaswegian teens whose high level of variant use aligned with high levels of media engagement, did not demonstrate a passive relationship with the program – as what is often imaged when one hears the term media influence – but rather an almost parasocial attachment to the television show's plot and characters. This is what is believed to have influenced their use of the innovative London English variants that are also used by characters in the program. And interestingly, this phenomenon does not suggest that their positive attitude toward characters in the show led to a positive association of London accents that resulted in an increased use of the variants, because most Glaswegian speakers reported negative opinions of London accents. Therefore, their accelerated use of new language features was truly unconscious and due in part to their engagement with television, alongside linguistic and social factors, demonstrating the media's ability to affect the deeper level structure of community grammars. These findings were only possible through the incorporation of media effects research methodologies such as seriously considering deeper psychological levels of media engagement and including these factors in multivariate statistical models. Though this evidence is compelling in many ways, it remains controversial, and little follow up work has been done since about 2014, due to the many reservations of variationist sociolinguists.

Overall, it can be seen that certain limits within the subfield prevent researchers from accepting the findings of those like Stuart-Smith and suppress any voices suggesting new methods for investigating the issue of media influence on language change. Some of the most important sources in my research came from a 2014 issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, in which Dave Sayers presented his 'mediated innovation model' to give future researchers a

framework for more seriously interrogating media influence on language change through the incorporation of media effects research methodologies such as those used by Stuart-Smith in Glasgow. In the same issue, dominant names in the field like Trudgill were given space to respond, and some dismissed Sayers' claims that media influence could ever be evidenced. This is a pattern that can be seen throughout the history of media influence research in variationist sociolinguistics. Influential names such as Labov, Trudgill, Chambers, and the Milroys wrote off media influence in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, and their opinions became law, even as media types advanced rapidly. Many of the researchers responding to Sayers' piece in the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, such as Tagliamonte and Stuart-Smith, emphasize how quickly media is changing in the 21st century. With new applications like augmented and virtual reality, much media is no longer a passive experience, and media in general is beginning to look vastly different than in previous years. Androutsopoulos and Gunter hold that the only way for variationists to be able to meaningfully study language change in the context of these rapidly evolving media types is to incorporate aspects of not only media effects research, as Tagliamonte and Sayers suggest, but also other subfields of sociolinguistics, such as interactional sociolinguistics which considers language in specific contexts of interaction with other mediums. In this way, even if no more compelling evidence for media influence is found and the early opinions of sociolinguists are proven to be correct, this will have been confirmed through the use of methodologies that consider the full scope of the issue and do not suppress or limit findings.

In many academic and social spheres similar situations inevitably arise. Researchers and leaders become trapped in the presuppositions from the past despite living in a changing world and devalue new voices that suggest dissenting findings and opinions when they arise. They likewise refuse to reach beyond the traditional practices of their groups and to become more

interdisciplinary or interconnected with others. This is detrimental to their ability to reach their full potential in whatever they are seeking to accomplish. Breaking barriers and structures is often more productive than remaining within such boundaries and suppressing others.