

*Contact, convergence, and covariation:
What Mr. Rodgers knows about language change*

Linguists have long recognized language contact as a harbinger of language change (Weinreich 1953, Thomason and Kaufman 1988, Winford 2013 *i.a.*). Yet, our understanding of the relationship between contact and change remains incomplete. Chief among unanswered questions is whether structural convergence between languages is an inevitable byproduct of contact. That is, given sufficient contact, will two linguistic systems eventually become more alike? Also inadequately understood is the extent to which the effects of contact reverberate throughout entire linguistic systems. Are the outcomes of contact holistic in nature, broadly shaped and uniformly distributed across linguistic systems and communities of speakers? Or, might contact-induced language change be compartmentalized, restricted to certain levels of linguistic structure and specific members of the speech community?

These questions bear not only on our understanding of the dynamics of language contact, but also on sociolinguistic theory more generally. Indeed, a major theoretical debate within contemporary sociolinguistics concerns the relationship between variables across linguistic systems, and leading scholars differ markedly in whether they expect multiple variables to ‘cohere’ across speech communities. Guy and Hinskens (2016:3) characterize the expectation of co-variation or coherence between variables as follows: ‘the orderly variables that define the community should collectively behave in parallel: variants (or rates of use of variants) that index a given style, status, or a social characteristic should co-occur.’ This perspective contrasts with the view that speakers directly, actively, and idiosyncratically exploit the social signaling potential of variants in order to establish stances between themselves and their interlocutors (through a process Eckert (2008) has described as ‘bricolage’), allowing for the possibility that sets of variables fail to cohere.

The present study explores these themes within the context of Spanish-English contact in the city of Boston, MA. The analysis focuses on variation in four linguistic features as they occur in sociolinguistic interviews with 24 Spanish-speaking Bostonians: (1) subject pronoun use, (2) syntactic constituent order, (3) non-silent hesitation phenomena, or *filled pauses*, and (4) syllable-final /s/ weakening. Results indicate that contact, convergence, and covariation go hand in hand for the first three features: Speakers who have more experience living in the United States are more likely to fill their pauses with centralized vowels (e.g. with schwa or /a/ rather than /e/), more likely to use overt subject pronouns (e.g. *yo pinto* instead of *pinto*, both ‘I paint’), and less likely to use post-verbal subjects (e.g. they strongly prefer *Pablo corre* to *corre Pablo*, both ‘Pablo runs’). In contrast, patterns of coda /s/ weakening fail to show evidence of convergence with the linguistic norms of English. A potential explanation may lie in the differing social salience of these features in the Hispanophone world. While the first three are relatively low in salience, coda /s/ figures prominently in ideologies of linguistic prestige. This interpretation suggests that high salience features are less likely to covary than are features that ‘fly under the sociolinguistic radar’. It also suggests a way for the theoretical notions of coherence and bricolage to be coexistent and complementary.

Word count: 497

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