Style-shifting over the lifespan:
Evidence from a Canadian icon

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From its inception, variationist sociolinguistic work has often relied on a sample of the language of a community at a single point in time to identify change in the community, i.e. apparent time (Labov 1963 *et seq*). This construct assumes that the idiolect remains relatively stable in adulthood. However, recent work on the same individuals over several points in time has called this assumption into question by demonstrating that idiolects can indeed change in adulthood (Sankoff 2004, 2006, Nahkola and Saanilahti 2004, Sankoff and Blondeau 2007, Raumolin-Brunberg 2005, 2009). A common finding is that proportions of certain variants increase in the direction of change in progress in the speech community; however, shifts of variants to new contexts or changing constraints on variation are less likely to occur (Raumolin-Brunberg 2005, Sankoff and Blondeau 2007).

One exception to these trends is future tense in Montreal French, where individuals using categorical periphrastic future (*je vais aller)* shifted to the formal inflectional future (*j'irai*) later in their lives (Evans Wagner and Sankoff 2011). This suggests that speakers can change their grammar past the critical period/incrementation. Another explanation is also possible: as the social status of an individual changes across their lifetime, they may adjust the level of formality with which they present themselves in a sociolinguistic interview.

In this paper, I test this possibility by investigating lifespan change in the Canadian television personality and political satirist Rick Mercer. Because Mercer has undergone both geographic and social mobility through his long career he is an ideal candidate for investigation. Moreover, Mercer's creative output has distinct styles that have remained constant over a 23-year period from 1993 to 2016: reports, interviews, and rants. The questions are: 1) does Mercer change his language over time? If so, 2) is there any difference in his language use across styles over time? I probe this question with a comparative sociolinguistic analysis of four morphosyntactic variables whose behaviour is well known in Canadian English: future temporal reference, stative possession, deontic modality, and restrictive relative clauses. The wealth of materials on Mercer provides sufficient data (over 1000 tokens) for each variable to be analyzed and compared across time and style.

Logistic regression analyses testing well known predictors for these variables consistently selects style as the most significant effect. In rants Mercer produces more standard variants; in interviews he produces informal variants. Taken together these findings confirm stability after incrementation (Labov 2001), but only when style is held constant. This result highlights that adults are capable of consistent and extreme style-shifting across their lifetime and demonstrates that style must be taken into account when diagnosing lifespan change.

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