The Dhutmose Letters: Lifespan Change in Ancient Egypt?
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Real-time sociolinguistics is a way of tracking variables over time by collecting data from the same individual(s) or community at different points in time. This paper uses real-time data to compare change/stability within the individual to historical language change/stability, investigating two possessive variables – one stable variable and one change in progress – in the language of an Ancient Egyptian scribe. The change variable consists of two variants, each with a clitic possessor; the stable variable consists of two variants, each with a nominal possessor.

Dhutmose, a high-ranking scribe, writes letters between 1099 BC and 1077 BC, for a total of 331 tokens. Fisher's exact tests (p<0.01) reveal a significant difference in Dhutmose's use of both stable variants from his first series of letters (1095 BC) to his second (c. 1085 BC) – but no significant difference between his second and third series of letters (1077 BC). Since Dhutmose achieves high status and reaches middle age between the first two series of letters, this could be evidence of lifespan change – perhaps a contributing factor to the variable's stability. There was no significant difference in his usage of the language change variants; throughout his letters he has a high rate of the innovative form, as expected for a period when the change is already in full swing (cf. Kroch 2005).

An alternative account of this difference in Dhutmose's possessive language over time is style shift: Dhutmose only writes to government officials during his first series of letters, while his second two series also include letters to his son. There is evidence for differences in the change variable when comparing letters to his son and letters to officials – Dhutmose uses more of the older variant when writing to officials. This in line with previous work, which indicates that the innovative form of the variant is disfavoured in official contexts (Gardiner *in press*; Gardiner 2015). However, removing the letters to his son still yields a statistically significant change in Dhutmose's use of the two stable variants from 1095 to 1085, ruling out style as a factor and reasserting lifespan change as an explanation for the effect.

We can also use these results to tell us about larger trends associated with the stable variable: in his letters to the officials, Dhutmose is, naturally, discussing official matters. Dhutmose's letters to his son include official matters as well – but he also includes his inquiries after his son's health and his prayers for the gods' protection. This provides us with insight into what words themselves may have an effect on the stable variable – Dhutmose's use of god-related or other high-stats words in his letters to his son is twice as high as in his letters to officials. Applying this finding to the larger set of 2439 stable variable tokens reveals that high-status nouns have a very strong effect on variant choice, regardless of whether the reference is in the possessor (FW 0.70) or the possessum (FW 0.79).

References

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