# Variation and Morphosyntactic Change:
# The Case of Stative Possession in English

Sali A. TAGLIAMONTE
University of Toronto, Canada

## ABSTRACT

In this paper I demonstrate how actively changing linguistic features can provide valuable evidence for understanding diachronic processes. The stative possessive in English, as in (1), is a case in point.

(1) a.  I*'ve got* a cousin that **has** it and she gets it every month (CMK/I)
    b.  They **got** a lovely family bible … Thomas **has** it. (CLB/q)

The construction with *have* is the oldest. *Got* was added in the late 16th century producing *have got*. However, *have* often contracted, leading to '*v/'s got* and then in some cases elided leaving *got* alone. Yet all variants persist in contemporary English dialects—*have/has; have/has got; 'v/'s got; got*—providing a quintessential case of 'layering' of older and recently evolved forms (Hopper, 1991:23).

Using comparative sociolinguistic techniques and variationist methodology, I provide an analysis of this variation, as illustrated in (1), in a number of British and Northern Irish dialects, each of which has evolved in contrasting social and geographic contexts. Extrapolating from suggestions that the details of a form's lexical history may be reflected in constraints on its current distribution (Hopper and Traugott, 1993; Bybee et al., 1994), I test for internal constraints which have been implicated in this grammatical change, including the nature of the subject and object, type of possession, contraction, negation and question formation (Jespersen, 1961; Visser, 1963–73; Kroch, 1989).

The results reveal an inter-variety continuum of constraints and shifting strength of these constraints as the system undergoes linguistic change. Some are remarkably constant over time (*have got* favoured with concrete objects); others differ depending on the community (*have got* favoured for pronouns). In addition, the changing categorial status of main verb *have* can be viewed in patterns of negation and question formation. Taken together, the comparative and contrastive cross-dialectal patterns provide an insightful understanding of the underlying mechanisms of change in this area of English grammar.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

Bybee, J.L., R.D. Perkins, and W. Pagliuca (1994) *The evolution of grammar: Tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hopper, P.J. (1991) On some principles of grammaticization. In E.C. Traugott and B. Heine (ed.), *Approaches to Grammaticalization,* Volume 1: *Focus on Theoretical and Methodological Issues.* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 17–35.

Hopper, P.J. and E.C. Traugott (1993) *Grammaticalization.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jespersen, O.H. (1961). *A Modern English grammar: Part IV Syntax.* VII. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

Kroch, A.S. (1989). Reflexes of grammar in patterns of language change. *Language variation and change.* 1 (3): 199–244.

Visser, F. (1963–73). *An historical syntax of the English language.* Leiden: E.J. Brill.