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

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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


