

A sociolinguistic study of Birmingham English: language variation and change in a multi-ethnic British community

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The talk presents the results of a quantitative variationist study of the English spoken in Birmingham, a multi-ethnic city in England. The study explores how social network and social psychological orientation influence linguistic behaviour in a multi-ethnic British community. Following Andersen (1988) it was predicted that social psychological orientation, i.e. attitude towards the city and orientation towards ethnic identity, would have a stronger influence on linguistic behaviour than social network. Furthermore, it was predicted that ethnic orientation would have a stronger influence than attitude towards the city.

The speech of 106 informants, the majority of whom were adolescents, was analysed. The informants were drawn from three of the largest heritage groups in Birmingham: English, Pakistani and Black Caribbean. The analyses involved the comparison of linguistic differences across age, sex and heritage groups, as well as an analysis of the correspondence between linguistic variation and social network, attitude towards Birmingham and ethnic orientation. The results of the phonological variation will be presented in the talk.

The results show that whereas the Pakistani and Caribbean informants' linguistic behaviour was better accounted for by their orientation towards ethnic identity, social network was a better predictor of the English adolescents' linguistic behaviour. It is argued that these different, but related outcomes reflect the socio-cultural status of each of the three heritage groups within a multi-ethnic British community. Inter-group relations and identity choices, and therefore linguistic behaviour, are influenced by the prevailing socio-cultural ideology within a community. The findings demonstrate that the ethnic composition of the Birmingham community is an important factor underlying the trajectory of language change; many of the linguistic changes can only be understood with reference to the ethnic make up of the community. It is argued that ethnicity, which has been shown to be a significant social variable, must be given greater consideration within British dialect research.

Andersen, H. (1988). Center and periphery: adoption, diffusion, and spread. In Fisiak, J. (Ed). *Historical Dialectology: Regional and Social. Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 37*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter. Pp. 37-83.