

Sociophonetic Sound Change Research in the Past Decade

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Abstract

Sound change, broadly defined as the process by which systematic phonetic variation becomes regularized and leads to shifts in phonological systems, has been studied through both phonetic and sociolinguistic lenses. While phonetic research emphasizes articulatory and acoustic preconditions, sociolinguistic approaches examine how sound change is situated in the social world. This literature review aims at introducing the sociolinguistic sound change research paradigm, and advancements that lead to a more fine-grained model over the past decade. Through an analysis of representative sociolinguistic works from 401 sound change studies in the past decade, a well-established paradigm of sociolinguistic sound change studies is grouping and labelling speakers by demographic factors, or macro social factors, to systematically address two research questions which are (1) from what features we can depict a sound change as ongoing, ceasing or reversing and (2) of what features speakers are using innovative variants, or more inclined to perceive and produce them, thus leading the propagation of sound change (i.e. the innovator of sound change). However, the validity and adaptability of such paradigm has been challenged. For example, generational differences observed from apparent-time studies in which speakers of different levels of age are compared are used as evidence to sound changes in progress but have been questioned that in the context of endangered languages as Gaelic, enough social similarities must be shared between generations in order to make them meaningfully comparable through the apparent-time modeling.

The advancements are motivating the integration of sociolinguistic and phonetic studies of sound change into sociophonetic studies, including (1) the inclusion of understudied social groups (e.g., sexual and ethnic minorities) and individual agency (e.g., political ideology, local orientation) in conditioning sound change, and (2) the integration of sociolinguistic perspectives into cognitive and phonetic models, revealing interactions between social factors and mechanisms like priming and phonetic convergence. Throughout the literature we find that the fine-grained models of phonetic underpinnings of sound change require detailed explanations to individual and community level, and quantitatively relating social factors to sound change is inevitably realized on a phonetic basis. The findings underscore the need for more inclusive models that account for both individual agency and broader social structures in understanding phonological variation, and the benefits of integrating social, phonetic and cognitive sciences into sound change study.