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Extending the window on change: Moving beyond synchrony

Abstract

The emphasis of variationist sociolinguistics is often some current state of a language or variety, yet the roots of the field are grounded in questions emerging from the study of language in historical perspective. Current states of language do not emerge context free. They represent ongoing and continuous evolution and development, entailing that footprints from earlier stages should be evident in synchronic practice. In this talk I explore the ways in which synchronic perspectives can function as distractions from diachronic trends in variable systems. Operationalizing the *longue durée* (Braudel 1958), which distinguishes between short term surface oscillations and long term systemic shifts, I argue that the examination of linguistic structure and usage beyond the living speech community is often necessary to tease apart the genuine now from what only appears to be the now. I conclude that when examining apparent synchronic cataclysms, it is necessary to probe the history of a variable system or feature, else risk falling for the Recency Illusion, the belief that uses noticed (or examined) in synchronic perspective are in fact recent (Zwicky 2005).