New speakers: challenges and opportunities for variationist sociolinguistics

Jonathan Kasstan (Queen Mary University of London)

j.kasstan@qmul.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0003-4134-5876

Abstract:

While the field of variationist sociolinguistics has advanced rapidly since Labov (1966), it remains the case that a socially informed theory of language change continues to be influenced by only very few languages, typically English and a handful other dominant European languages. This article considers recent work on the emergence of new speakers in (severely) endangered or minority language communities, and what they might have to offer variationist theory. Although definitions can vary, it has become convention to describe new speakers as individuals ‘with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual education programs, revitalization projects or as adult language learners’ (O’Rourke et al. 2015: 1). There is now a wealth of literature available on new speakers in typologically dissimilar language contexts, though, so far, very little work has adopted the variationist paradigm. This article will argue that new speakers can figure prominently in variationist models of diffusion and change, taking the classic sociolinguistic factor of social networks as an example. The article ends by proposing a manifesto of potential research trajectories, based on current gaps in the literature.
1. Introduction

Since Labov (1966)’s seminal work in New York City, variationist sociolinguistics has sought to develop a socially accountable theory of linguistic diffusion and change. However, as Nagy and Meyerhoff (2008), Smakman (2015) and Stanford (2016) have all highlighted, non-English languages continue to play only a very marginal influential role in the process. Their surveying of the variationist-sociolinguistic literature reveals a surprising dearth of geolinguistic diversity in leading variationist venues; language variation and change, then, continues to be the preserve of English and a handful of other dominant European languages. Although the picture is slowly changing, such observations have important implications for the development of a generalisable, cross-linguistic sociolinguistic theory. Moreover, as Stanford points out, non-English language communities can offer ‘fresh viewpoints’ on established theoretical and methodological frameworks (2016: 526). To evidence this, the present article will consider one classic sociolinguistic factor: social networks. Variationist studies that employ a social network methodology have demonstrated that close-knit ties support highly localised linguistic norms and intercommunity distinctiveness in a unilingual context, whereas weak ties promote susceptibility to processes of levelling and innovation diffusion (e.g. Milroy and Milroy 1985). These findings are now well-documented in monolingual English-speaking communities (e.g. Milroy 1980 in Belfast, Kerswill and Williams 2000 in Milton Keynes). In bi/multilingual communities, social network theory has also been deployed to try to account for processes contributing towards language obsolescence, where loose-knit ties have been argued to bring about language shift (e.g. Li and Milroy 1995 on Chinese communities in Tyneside). However, Milroy maintains that, while of considerable theoretical interest, in such under-studied contexts, it is much less clear how the
parameters of social networks can be adequately operationalised to account for
socially and geographically mobile speakers, whose ties are considered ‘weak’ in the
traditional sense (2004: 562). Further, while only a very small number of studies have
attempted to apply this model to account for variation and change in minority variety
speech communities in contact with English (e.g. Matsumoto 2010), much less
attention still has been paid to non-English contexts altogether.¹

In response to Stanford (2016)’s ‘call for more diverse sources of data […] in
non-English contexts’, this article considers recent work on the emergence of new
speakers in (severely) endangered or minority language communities, and what this
work might have to offer variationist theory. Although definitions can vary, it has
become convention to describe new speakers as individuals ‘with little or no home or
community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through
immersion or bilingual education programs, revitalization projects or as adult
language learners’ (O’Rourke et al. 2015: 1). There is now a wealth of literature
available on new speakers of typologically dissimilar languages, though, so far, few
of these studies have adopted the variationist paradigm. Instead, the bulk of the work
on new speakers has tended to be qualitative in nature, focusing on interaction-level
analysis, with ideological themes oscillating around sociolinguistic authenticity in
endangered-language communities (e.g. native speakers as gate keepers and
authenticators of language), legitimacy of new speakers (e.g. as community members)
and power relations with other speaker types (e.g. their role in language revitalisation
efforts). That said, some new-speaker studies have also recognised that the speech of
new speakers can be far removed from community norms (or at least perceived as
such). Although few of these studies are devoted to quantitative methods, they can

¹Gal (1978; 1979), Bortoni-Ricardo (1985) and Lippi-Green (1989) are perhaps the best-
known of these network-based studies.
(and, it will be argued, should) appeal to the variationist paradigm, which – for fifty years now – has sought to understand the social significance of language variation, and the mechanisms that drive linguistic change. These fundamental tenets of the field (as proposed by Weinreich et al. 1969) will carry important implications for contexts of (extreme) language shift, such as those offered by many of the new-speaker studies surveyed below. Therefore, this article attempts to bridge these two areas of inquiry. To do so, it will first be necessary to present an overview of the recent literature on new speakers in sociolinguistics. In Section 2, a number of studies are reviewed to illustrate how new speakers have been characterised as social actors; how they can differ from typical second-language learners; and what observations have been made where new speakers emerge in communities with fluctuating sociolinguistic practices. In Section 3, focus is given to the very few existing quantitative production studies that include samples of new speakers, where the evidence presented illustrates how new speakers can be conceived of as agents of sociolinguistic change in variationist terms. Then, using the classic micro-level factor of social networks as a case study, Section 4 exemplifies how new speakers can figure prominently in variationist models of diffusion and change. Owing to the largely qualitative nature of new-speaker studies to date, Section 5 concludes with some suggestions for future research trajectories, based on current gaps in the literature.

2. On ‘new speakers’

The new speaker label is one of recent prominence in the language endangerment literature. While regional or minority language communities in many parts of the

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2 While this article provides a comprehensive overview of sites where new speakers have been the object of study, it should be noted that the vast majority of these studies converge on minority European varieties. This article is therefore inherently Eurocentric, though, where available, research on new speakers of non-European varieties is also discussed.
world continue to undergo an extreme kind of attrition, particularly in the face of 
increased urbanisation and globalisation (see e.g. Amano et al. 2014), new speakers 
are nonetheless emerging as a result of revitalisation efforts and increasingly 
favourable language policies. These new speakers have often had little or no 
community/home exposure to the target variety, which they typically acquire in a 
purely educational context. In the simplest terms, then, they are qualitatively different 
from native speakers, who acquire the language via intergenerational transmission, 
and other types of learners who may be exposed to the target in day-to-day life. 
However, as O’Rourke and Ramallo (2013: 288) note, a variety of different labels 
exist in the literature that can also refer to the new speaker phenomenon: ‘L2 
speaker’, ‘learner’, ‘heritage speaker’ etc. are common in Applied Linguistics, 
TESOL, and Multilingualism studies. That said, there are important levels of 
distinction that can be delineated between new speakers and other types of second-
language learners in socio-political terms. For instance, given that the target being 
acquired can be characterised in most cases as minorised, and obsolescent or 
moribund, new speakers tend to play a significant influential role by comparison with 
most other L2 contexts. In cases where severe endangerment is coupled with 
embryonic revitalisation efforts, new speakers not only represent an important 
proportion of the total speakers of the language, but they are also influential arbiters 
in emergent normative practices. They can therefore ‘occupy greater positions of 
authority in the language’s social hierarchy than many second language users would 
do’ (Nance et al. 2016: 168). Moreover, labels such as ‘L2 speaker’ or ‘learner’ are 
increasingly contested, mostly because they imply some deviation from an implicit 
native-speaker norm, as has been detailed extensively in the Applied Linguistics 
literature (see e.g. Firth and Wagner 1997). Owing to these observations, and under
the guise of the EU COST Action research network ‘New speakers in Multilingual Europe: Opportunities and Challenges’, O’Rourke and Ramallo (2013) and Walsh and Lane (2014) have proposed the notion of new speakerness. New speakerness implies a dynamic rather than fixed state: it ‘can include a continuum of speaker types, ranging from second language learners with limited competence […] right up to expert L2 users’ (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2013: 288). It can also refer to ‘a stance or subject position that becomes available to social actors’ (Jaffe 2015: 43) throughout the life-span, particularly in endangered-language contexts, where there is often no implicit, hierarchical, or standard norm.

It should be stressed, however, that, while new speakerness is a novel sociolinguistic notion, speakers that today might be labelled new have been the focus of scholarly attention since at least the 1980s. Trosset for instance highlighted that, at the time, ‘no systematic study [had] been undertaken of people attempting to learn a dying language’ (1986: 167) – a void that she was attempting to fill. Trosset foregrounds in particular the challenges faced by new speakers of Welsh entering an increasingly dwindling community of native speakers. In the late 1980s, Woolard made use of the label ‘new Catalans’ (1989: 44) to describe L2 Catalan speakers who come to adopt bilingual practices, seeing themselves as both Catalan and Spanish – a designation that, Woolard reports, very few native Catalanians would accept. More recently, Trenchs-Parera and Newman (2015: 494) identify such attitudes to be associated with a broader cosmopolitanism, where younger middle-class new speakers learn Catalan either for professional reasons, or as an academic exercise (see also Frekko 2013). Similarly, Urla distinguishes between euskaldun zaharrak (‘old Basques’), who she describes as ‘native Basque speakers who tend to be primarily from farming and fishing communities’, and euskaldun berriak (‘new Basques’),
comprised of ‘urban professionals, civil servants, and teachers who have mastered Standardised Basque’ (1993: 830).³ In these studies, then, early conceptualisations of new speakers are sketched out: in the context of Basque, for instance, they are described by Urra (1993) as middle-class urban dwellers, characteristics not typically associated with native speakers of minority varieties such as Basque or Occitan, traditionally viewed as overwhelmingly rural and working class (see e.g. Blanchet and Armstrong 2006). Moreover, the new Catalanians make use of different constructions of self that do not necessarily align clearly with community norms. Such descriptions are also very typical of Breton new speakers (Jones 1995; 1998a; 1998b).⁴ Unlike Catalan or Basque, Breton serves as a typical example of a language undergoing ‘gradual death’ (Campbell and Muntzel 1989: 182): native-speaker numbers have been dwindling for some time, and the conventional domains of usage have been eroded. However, attempts to revitalise Breton have led to the development of a learner variety (néo-Breton) which is reified predominantly by new speakers (or néo-Bretonnants). Jones describes these speakers as an urban intelligentsia, in that they are predominantly middle-class, urban-dwelling, well educated and highly politicised (1998a: 129). Moreover, in sharp contrast to native speakers, these new speakers typically acquire Breton as an academic exercise. As a result, they speak a standardised, pan-Brittany variety of Breton, which she reports to be unintelligible to native speakers. For example, to render Breton functional in additional domains, the néo-Bretonnants have innovated neologisms as opposed to borrowing from Standard French, as is the norm for the vast majority of native speakers; néo-Bretonnant lexicon is also typically purged of existing borrowings (see Table 1 for some

³ See more recently Ortega et al. on euskaldunberria, or more specifically ‘new speaker’ (2015: 93).
⁴ See most recently a special issue by Hornsby and Vigers (2013).
examples). In spite of these common ‘distanciation strategies’ (Thiers 1985), which are said to be ideologically motivated (see Hornsby 2013), Jones reports that their grammar shows considerable influence from Standard French.\(^5\) In many cases, new speakers of Breton are not community-insiders in the traditional sense. For instance, Hornsby (2015: 54-59) outlines how some speakers in his sample moved from areas far outside of Brittany into Breton-speaking heartlands, thereafter choosing to identify as a *brezhonegerez* (‘Breton speaker’). Although these speakers self-identify as *bretonnant*, other members of the community, who are typically more deeply rooted, can and do contest their status. As a result, Jones (1998b), Adkins (2013) and Hornsby (2013) also discuss the level of linguistic insecurity that is felt by both native speakers and new speakers where contact between the two occurs, and where issues pertaining to sociolinguistic authenticity\(^6\) (e.g. Coupland 2003) are foregrounded. Therefore, while Breton new speakers are seen as peripheral community members by those older and more established central members, it is clear that there is at least some overlap in terms of their respective networks.\(^7\) Moreover, their language use has been equated in the literature in some cases as approximating that of a ‘xenolect’.

\(^5\) It is noteworthy that recent production studies among young children in *Divan* (néo-Breton) schools do not necessarily support this observation (cf. Kennard and Lahiri 2017).

\(^6\) See contra Bucholtz (2003) for a critique of this notion.

\(^7\) A conceptual question might be raised here as to whether or not new and native speakers can be considered part of the same *speech community* (Labov 1972). While acknowledging the considerable attention that has been paid to problematising this notion in (variationist) sociolinguistics (e.g. Romain 1982), the present article follows Milroy (1980: 14), (Dorian 1982: 29), and Bortoni-Ricardo (1985: 80), in adopting instead Hymes (1974: 51)’s definition in terms of ‘common locality’ and ‘primary interaction’. Dorian (1982) in particular has shown why it is important that peripheral members with – what Hymes called – communicative competence (see Section 3) should not be excluded from any definition of speech community. Moreover, as Bortoni-Ricardo (1985) has shown, a network analysis can provide the appropriate means for assessing both common locality and primary interaction. It is also worth recalling Sankoff and Labov’s perspective, who argued that ‘every speaker is a member of many nested and intersecting speech communities’ (1979: 202). This has also been interpreted to mean ‘many different integrated networks’ (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985: 80).
representing ‘the pre-terminal stage of some dying languages’ (Jones 1998b: 323), rather than toeing communal norms.

Such observations are not unique to Europe. Alaskan Athabascan is an analogous North American example. All eleven recognised varieties of Athabascan are considered to be moribund, as English has largely supplanted each of them in all but the most intimate functional domains, and children are no longer raised with Athabascan as a mother-tongue. Much like the Breton example, language revitalisation strategies undertaken mostly by new speakers have led to linguistic variants that differ from native-speaker norms. As a result, these new-speaker forms are generally not accepted as authentic Athabascan variants by older speakers, who are documented as ‘laughing mercilessly’ (Holton 2009: 248) at their grandchildren’s efforts to learn, which in turn brings about a deep sense of social and linguistic insecurity.8 Further, given the vast geographical space that is considered Athabascan-speaking, opportunities for learners and native speakers to come together and interact are rare, and so the learners have taken to the Internet, which serves as a forum to exchange and interact in the minority variety. Since these Athabascan internauts are almost exclusively new speakers, Holton (2009) remarks that the web provides them with a virtual space in which to use their new-speaker varieties, free from native-speaker authentication. This hostility towards new speakerness provides a further important level of distinction between new speakers and other types of second-language learner contexts, and similar criticism of new-speaker practices are now also documented elsewhere (e.g. O’Rourke and Ramallo [2011] on Irish and Galician, Kasstan [2018] on Francoprovençal). The above – largely qualitative – research on

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8 It should be noted that attitudes can sometimes change at the ‘tip’ (Dorian 1981:51), as noted in the context of Tlingit (southeastern Alaska), with fewer than 200 speakers left. Here, elders are said to embrace language emersion retreats, designed to create new spaces for the use of Tlingit among both native speakers and new speakers (see Mitchell 2005).
new speakers of endangered languages reveals then a native/non-native divide, where
speakers on both sides are reported to be ‘socially and linguistically incompatible’
(O’Rourke and Ramallo 2011: 139): new speakers are seen as peripheral members of
the community, and new-speaker practices are described deviant from communal
norms. These findings are not limited to the cases explored above. Indeed, in recent
years, an increasing number of papers in typologically dissimilar contexts have
revealed many common themes and findings. New-speaker studies are now available
on Baseldytsch (Del Percio 2016), Belarusian (Woolhisser 2013), Catalan (Frekko
2013, Pujolar and Puigdevall 2015), Cornish (Sayers 2012, Sayers and Renkó-
Michelsén 2015), Corsican (Jaffe 2015), Francoprovençal (Kasstan 2015, Bichurina
2018, Kasstan and Müller 2018), Galician (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2013, Tomé
Lourido and Evans 2015; 2016), Giernesie and Jèrriais (Wilson et al. 2015, Sallabank
and Marquis 2018), Irish (Walsh 2013, O’Rourke and Walsh 2015), Lemko (Hornsby
2015), Louisiana Creole (Mayeux 2015), Manx (Ó hIfearnáin 2015), Occitan (Costa
2013), Scottish Gaelic (McLeod and O’Rourke 2015, Nance 2015, Nance et al. 2016),
Welsh (Robert 2009, Morris 2014), Western Armenian (Manoukian 2017), and
Yiddish (Hornsby 2015). Owing to the observations set out above that new speakers
are frequently characterised as employing linguistic variants that differ from
traditional norms, it is surprising that so few studies have made use of quantitative
variationist methods to better understand the social significance of this variation, or to
connect variation in production with broader questions of linguistic diffusion and
change. However, some recent studies have begun to focus on these areas of inquiry,
appealing in particular to variationist sociolinguistics.

3. New speakers and linguistic variation
In reference to the Corsican context for instance, Jaffe suggests that new speakers ‘[...] acquire a socially and communicatively consequential level of competence and practice in the minority language’ (2015: 25). Jaffe refers here not only to the level of linguistic competency that can be acquired by new speakers, but also to communicative competency (i.e. acquisition of sociolinguistic variation). While acquisition of variation (so-called ‘Type 2 variation’, following ‘Type 1’ or linguistic competence, Mougeon et al. 2004) among learners is not novel in the literature (see e.g. Drummond 2011 on Polish speakers and (t)-glottaling), recent studies reveal Type 2 variation to convey important social work among minority-variety new speakers, too, in spite of a cline of linguistic competency.

Using sociophonetic methods, Tomé Lourido and Evans (2015; 2016) explore speaker variation among neofalantes (‘new speakers’) of Galician in Spain. The new speakers in these studies were raised as Spanish monolinguals who acquire Galician in adulthood, later becoming bilingual, but Galician dominant. Both studies focus on the production of mid-vowels, where mid-high and mid-low contrasts are not present in Spanish, but are in Galician. The results reveal that neofalantes vowel production differed from that of Spanish dominants in the study in that at least some of the new speakers had acquired the Galician front and back mid-vowel contrasts. However, the neofalantes data suggested that the contrast made in mid vowels was not as great as that of the Galician dominants, who had acquired Galician before critical age. Based on this evidence, the authors identify an emergent hybrid category of vowels that they postulate to be deployed indexically (Silverstein 2003) by new speakers to convey speaker identity.⁹

⁹ However, this hybrid category, they argue, is not accompanied by a change in perception. In other words, the new speakers sampled could not distinguish neofalantes from Spanish-dominant bilinguals and Galician-dominant bilinguals to a statistically significant extent.
Similarly, Nance et al. (2016) explore linguistic variation among new speakers of Scottish Gaelic in Glasgow and Edinburgh, where revitalisation initiatives have driven a rise in employment opportunities requiring the language. The study focuses on word-final realisation of rhoticity, where palatalised or alveolar rhotic consonants are constrained by the quality of final vowel. While the native speakers in the sample broadly approximated to palatalised rhotics, the new speakers evidenced substantial variation in their production, with several new speakers preferring weakly rhotic or non-rhotic variants, in spite of high levels of proficiency. The authors present data to suggest that some proficient Gaelic new speakers ‘preferred an ideal self that was more oriented towards a new-speaker model and considered a native-speaker target as inauthentic’ (2016: 185), and that this was reflected in their production data. In other words, new speakers produce divergent linguistic variants from native speakers and other types of learners, based on alternative constructions of self, that do not necessarily align with community norms. So, while observations made in the context of Gaelic and Galician are similar to those outlined in the case of Breton above, the advantage of the variationist methods adopted in both cases here illustrates the social significance of the variable linguistic behaviour among new speakers.

Analogous observations have been made most recently by Kasstan and Müller (2018), who examine production data among new speakers of Francoprovençal – a severely endangered language spoke in parts of France, Switzerland, and Italy. While native speakers broadly evidenced phonological levelling of palatalised lateral approximants in obstruent + lateral onset clusters (a feature of Francoprovençal, but not of Standard French), the data revealed that new speakers can style-shift between highly localised dialectal variants and pan-regional variants in sociolinguistic interviews, with very limited linguistic competency. The authors argue that these pan-
regional forms are also deployed indexically to convey membership to a wider
language revitalisation movement. This suggests, as has been argued elsewhere, that
‘being a new speaker of a minority language does not necessarily require full mastery
of that language, and that knowing certain registers or mastering certain genres might
be enough for what social actors seek to achieve with the minority language’ (Costa
2018). In this case, new speakerness is invoked to signal a very different kind of
Francoprovençal identity when compared with native speakers, who can openly reject
new-speaker practices (see Kasstan 2018). Kasstan and Müller further postulate that
these new forms might come to be community norms in the future, following Jaffe:
“new” […] “learner” linguistic forms may stand out as “new speaker” indices at one
different point in a community’s sociolinguistic trajectory, but may become the norm at some
later date’ (2015: 26). Studies such as these clearly illustrate the potential of
bridging research on new speakers with variationist sociolinguistic theory, in order to
illustrate the social significance of linguistic variation in (severely) endangered-
language communities, and the parallels that can be drawn with the broader
variationist work on English and other dominant languages. New speaker studies also
have much to offer the variationist literature on stylisation of speech, and, on the basis
of the observations made by Tomé Lourido and Evans (2015; 2016), Nance et al.
(2016), and Kasstan and Müller (2018), it seems possible to conceive of new speakers
as agents of sociolinguistic change in variationist terms. It will next be argued that a
social network analysis can offer a fruitful case study for understanding the social
mechanisms that underpin this variation.

4. A social network approach to analysing new-speaker variation

10 The end-result of which is probably best exemplified by the case of reconstructed Cornish
(e.g. Sayers and Renkó-Michelsén 2015).
In Milroy (1980)’s classic Belfast study, she argued that close-knit, dense and multiplex network ties foster intra-community cohesion and norm enforcement, whereas sparse and uniplex network ties are hospitable conduits for variability and innovation diffusion. Her analysis was based on a network-strength scale, which examined the relationship between the variable strength of network ties to an ego (the central member), and variation in language behaviour. This approach was designed principally to test the effect of strong ties among monolingual speakers within a tightly defined geographical area. Milroy’s general observations on network structure and language variation have since been replicated too in big urban centres with rapidly changing social landscapes, as evidenced in Milton Keynes (Kerswill and Williams 2000) and London (Cheshire et al. 2008). Further, a small number of important studies have attested to these outcomes in non-English contexts, too. For instance, Bortoni-Ricardo recognised the social network paradigm ‘as an effective analytical tool to tackle the issue of variation, especially in fluid settings undergoing rapid change’ (1985: 69) in her study on language variation and change among rural Caipira speakers moving into urban Brazilian centres. Broadly, she observed that, in the rural-to-urban transition, typical low-status Caipira features decreased and that categorical non-standard rules of Caipira speakers’ repertoires became variable where strong networks were weakened, exposing these speakers to prestige norms (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985: 239-241).

It is proposed here that a social network approach can also be adopted to elucidate the social mechanisms underpinning new-speaker behaviour described in Section 3. As Bortoni-Ricardo (1985) and others have argued, the social network paradigm is perhaps best suited to analysing variation in communities undergoing rapid change, with fluctuating sociolinguistic norms. These descriptors also are also
clearly characteristic of the (severely) endangered-language communities that have been illustrated above, where dwindling native-speaker bases have galvanised revitalisation efforts, which in turn have led to emergent new-speaker practices in communities often lacking hierarchical or standard norms. New speakers have in particular been described above as peripheral members in their communities: owing to their linguistic practices that do not toe community norms, their status is contested by native speakers, and they are in some cases chastised for their practices. These attributes are not dissimilar from those used to describe sociolinguistic ‘Lames’ (e.g. Labov 1973, Edwards 1992), i.e. peripheral group members who are less familiar with the norms of more central members in the vernacular peer-group. However, unlike ‘Lames’, new speakers make up a significant proportion of the total speaker numbers in their communities, and, as has been argued, this grants them power and prestige as arbiters in fluctuating normative practices. It is therefore unclear what the determinants of strong and weak ties might mean in such contexts. That said, a social network analysis can still be operationalised to fit the relevant research questions for new-speaker studies. In particular, the absence of an overtly prestigious norm presents at least one important research question: if – as has been proposed above – new speakers are agents of change, then are they responsible for the diffusion of new vernacular forms in their communities, as suggested by Jaffe (2015) and Kasstan & Müller (2018)? Do these new forms then penetrate native-speaker networks? While further research is needed to systematically test this hypothesis, some evidence from the new-speaker literature suggests that such diffusion is possible. For instance, Hornsby (2013) identifies in his sample a small number of native Breton speakers who do not necessarily harbour negative attitudes towards new-speaker variants. Similarly, on the basis of a subset of Francoprovençal lexical variables, Kasstan
(2013) has shown that, in some cases, native speakers can produce neologised new-speaker variants in a wordlist translation tasks (see Table 2). However, only 5% (N=39) of native speakers sampled were able to produce them, all of whom had at least some contact with new-speaker participants. A social network analysis therefore lends itself nicely to testing these sorts of hypotheses, though the framework would need to be altered to account for the new-speaker context.

Following Matsumoto (2010)’s study on the island of Palau, a social network analysis based on active and passive ties may be best suited to such a context. Under this framework, first proposed by Milardo (1988), and adapted by Li and Milroy (1995) and Matsumoto (2010), active ties consist of exchange and interactive networks: exchange networks constitute members such as friends, with whom the ego not only interacts routinely, but also exchanges symbolic resources, such as direct advice, criticism, support and interference (Milardo 1988: 23); Matsumoto (2010: 140), following Li and Milroy (1995), identifies such networks as constituting strong ties in the traditional sense. Conversely, interactive networks constitute members with whom the ego interacts with frequently, but on whom the ego does not rely for the sorts of symbolic resources that define the exchange network. Such ties, which are characteristically weak, might consist of work colleagues or neighbours, for instance. In addition, passive ties are identified as entailing an absence of regular contact, but are nonetheless valued by the ego as a source of influence and moral support. Matsumoto (2010) suggests that close friends, spread over a large geographical space, best describes the nature of passive ties. While the quality of passive ties is ambiguous in these studies, they can be conceived of for our purposes as strong, given the quality of the relationships. In applying this network analysis, Matsumoto finds that social networks can best account for both code and choice of linguistic
variants in her multilingual community (2010: 160). Exchange and interactive networks function in an analogous way to strong and weak ties in Belfast: exchange networks (both active and passive) promote the maintenance of the vernacular (a local variety of Japanese) at the expense of the incoming dominant language (English), whereas interactive networks act as conduits for modern Japanese, and the diffusion of English.

Distinguishing between these different network orders is useful for analysing new-speaker variation, as the framework can account for the behaviour of individuals whose language patterns may not be like those of their peers, or other members of the network; ‘they can be shown to have contracted different types of personal network structures’ (Li and Milroy 1995: 155). To apply this framework to a new-speaker context, the characteristics of the community under investigation would need to be properly reflected in the methodology-design. For instance, Kasstan (2015) outlines how a social network analysis, based on the number and quality of first-order (exchange) ties is able to account for innovative vernacular forms among a small number of new speakers of Francoprovençal. However, given (a) the extent to which some new speakers were ostracised in the community, and (b) the overall size of the community of new speakers, he found that the distinction between the various network types employed by Matsumoto (2010) to be too nuanced for his endangered-language context. Instead Kasstan (2015) adopted an integration index based on that of Cheshire (1982) and Edwards (1992), where participants are assigned a score which determines how well-integrated they are into their respective networks. The challenge for the study was to establish an integration index for two very different speech communities in France and Switzerland, that was not only sensitive to the socio-economic factors of each fieldwork area, but which could also account for very
different types of speakers, as well as the unique sociolinguistic context of
Francoprovençal (see Kasstan 2015 for details). As Milroy points out, though, each
community will vary, and it is up to the investigator to pursue ‘the most relevant and
easily measurable cultural categories’ (1987: 216).

However, it remains to be seen how successfully new speakers might ‘figure
prominently in a socially accountable theory of linguistic diffusion and change’
(Milroy 2004: 563), which has yet to be fully explored. Few new-speaker studies have
attempted to bridge speech production data with these broader concerns. If, as
Kasstan (2015) argues, new speakers maintain characteristically weak network ties
with native speakers, then it should be possible to model new speakers into social
network theory as mobile speakers who harbour numerous loose and uniplex
networks.\textsuperscript{13} However, little work on new speakers has yet systematically tested this
possibility, even though some studies provide data ripe for a network analysis. Nance
\textit{et al.} (2016), for instance, do not conceive of their sample as a social network, but,
loosely, as a \textit{Community of Practice}, which, in Wenger’s terms, consists of a body of
individuals with a shared repertoire, who come together around mutual engagement in
a jointly negotiated enterprise (1998: 76). This is clearly reflected in Nance \textit{et al.’s}
study, ‘where many speakers use Gaelic in their work and attend a range of social and
cultural events in the expectation that Gaelic will be used and other Gaelic speakers
will be present’ (2016: 168). While the \textit{Community of Practice} model is useful for the
purpose of their analysis, it would not illuminate on the potential spread of new-
speaker variants into the wider Gaelic-speaking networks (as proposed above), and

\textsuperscript{13} The observation that new speakers maintain inherently loose and uniplex ties is based on a
long-held tenet of social network theory: ‘on the whole, networks in rural areas tend towards
density and multiplexity and in urban areas to uniplexity and sparseness’ (Milroy and
Margrain 1980: 48). As reviewers to this paper have suggested, though, it is worth
acknowledging that not all new-speaker networks will be equally loose and uniplex, which
may have implications for this revised framework. Further research on new speakers of
severely endangered or minority languages is needed to confirm this.
the associated social significance that any such variants might carry for different communities of practice; this is where social networks are most useful.

5. Trajectories for future research

Research on new speakers, then, has much to offer the variationist paradigm, which has renewed calls for ‘more diverse sources of data’ (Stanford 2016), and this article has suggested that social network theory, a still very productive avenue of inquiry in variationist research, provides a useful bridge for applying variationist theory to an expanding body of data on new speakers of (severely) endangered or minority languages. New speakers have been shown to play complex roles in these communities: they can be ostracised by native speakers for their new-speaker practices, and, yet, paradoxically, in those contexts where the target variety is severely endangered, new speakers represent an important proportion of total speaker numbers. In variationist terms, new speakers maintain peripheral community status, akin to ‘the working margins’ in Dorian (1982: 29)’s terms, and this article has argued that they overlap with native-speaker networks. More research is therefore needed in order to establish the sociolinguistic correlates of these factors.

A synthesis of the literature on new speakers reveals a number of other avenues of inquiry, too. First, as has been discussed, new-speaker studies have evidenced many common cross-linguistic findings. However, most of these studies have been undertaken independently: there is now a need for greater comparative-sociolinguistic work on new speakers. Some comparative work does already exist. For instance, O’Rourke et al. (2015) comprises a special issue dedicated to new speakers of minority varieties, though the contributions address various different themes across disparate methodological frameworks (none of which adopt variationist
sociolinguistic methods). Hornsby (2015) is a comparative linguistic ethnographic study of Breton, Lemko, and Yiddish. Although rich in qualitative detail, the study offers little in terms of speech production data, which is outside the scope of the volume. Adopting the comparative-sociolinguistic methods that have evolved from the variationist paradigm into new-speaker research would elucidate our understanding of language variation across contexts, as such methods cross-compare conditioning effects on sociolinguistic variation.  

Comparative-sociolinguistic endeavours could consider emerging minority-language new speakers in heritage-language contexts, such as those brought to light most recently by McEwan (2015) in the context of Gaelic spoken in Nova Scotia. No quantitative work has yet compared new speakers of homeland and heritage Gaelic. Potential research questions here might include, for example, asking whether or not different patterns of language use emerge among new speakers in homeland and heritage Gaelic (cf. Nagy et al. 2018 for an analogous context of homeland and heritage Francoprovençal varieties).

Secondly, there is little work that implicates new speakers in well-known instances of language change. In general, we maintain a very poor formal understanding of how linguistic innovations have been introduced by multilingual speakers as contact-induced language change. This begs a number of potentially interesting theoretical questions: what is the role that non-dominant bi-/multilingual speakers play in language change? What types of innovations do they tend to introduce into the language(s) in which they are not dominant? Are specific aspects of linguistic structure particularly vulnerable to such innovations? New speakers as a novel category therefore offers new ground for historical linguistics.

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14 Tagliamonte (2012) for instance highlights the contribution made by comparative sociolinguistics to research on African American Vernacular English
Thirdly, there is equally little evidence of any work currently being undertaken on new speakers of endangered languages in cognitive linguistics, despite the fact that there are some potentially very important implications for our understanding of language acquisition. For instance, acquisition research has evidenced the significant role played by speakers’ L1 on L2 phonological categorisation in minority-variety contexts where English is the target (e.g. McCarthy et al. 2014). What then are the implications for new speakers acquiring a minorised variety? There are fruitful avenues of inquiry to be explored, here.

Lastly, it is incumbent on future research initiatives that there be meaningful social impact emanating from new-speaker research. The above synthesis outlines significant hurdles faced by new speakers entering (severely) endangered-language communities (e.g. sentiments of social and linguistic incompatibility between new speakers and native speakers). Bridging this native/new-speaker divide must be addressed, though no clear avenues reveal themselves. As new-speaker practices, and linguistic innovations in particular, might be posited to contribute towards this divide (see Kasstan 2018), the development of a ‘positive framework’ (Meyerhoff 2015: 78) for speakers to evaluate language change might be a suitable point of departure.

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Works Cited


Table 1. Lexical variation in (néo-)Breton (adapted from Jones 1995, 1998b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>néo-Breton</th>
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<th>English gloss</th>
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<td>Neologised new-speaker variants</td>
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