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# Addressing the actuation question for local linguistic communities

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### 1. Introduction

Questions concerning language contact and change have long been explored by linguists. Notably, the Neogrammarians investigated the regularity of sound change and the factors contributing to exceptions in the predicted regularity, and proposed that language contact was one such factor. Weinreich, Labov and Herzog's (1968) seminal article not only bridged historical linguistics and dialectology, it also laid forth, for the emerging field of sociolinguistics, five "empirical principals for the theory of language change" (1968:183): (1) the constraints problem; (2) the transition problem; (3) the embedding problem; (4) the evaluation problem; and (5) the actuation problem. The actuation problem is the theoretical linguistic question which asks, "given the proposition that linguistic change is change in social behavior, then" how does change proceed, and what factors are involved in the process of change? (Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968:186).

It is agreed that linguistic change and social behavior are linked and that one sheds light on the other. While social change does not necessarily result in linguistic change, linguistic change often reflects changes in social behavior or identity. Since it is accepted that language is always changing, and that this change is not due to chance alone (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968:112), we need to understand what causes change and how it proceeds from

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social behavior to then be reflected in linguistic behavior. This paper hopes to demonstrate that by expanding our data sets to include linguistically external evidence from ethnology, ethnography, social networks and social history, it is possible to address the actuation question for local linguistic communities.

### 2. Framing the Actuation Question

In order to address the actuation question, we must first identify what it is we are to study. As sociolinguists and dialectologists, our main goal is not only to gain an understanding of the frequency distributions of linguistic variables, which constitute a shared linguistic norm for a specified group of individuals, but also to gain an understanding into *why* the individuals in a local linguistic community use their denotational code in a certain way, and *how* their localized use of a denotational code indexes changing internal and external "social concepts of groupness" (Silverstein 1996c). In other words, asking *why* and *how* change happens and *what it means* to those involved.

In the interest of time, I offer the following condensed working definition of a local linguistic community, which is highly influenced by Silverstein's (1996a) understanding of the sociology of language:

A local linguistic community shall be broadly defined as a geo-linguistically localizable group of people who share a coherent denotational code which constitutes a perduring community internal structure which, in turn, specifies shared modes of normativity relating to communication, identification and ideology.

To effectively examine and understand linguistic change in a local linguistic community, we must, as Silverstein (1996b) recommends, recognize that change is an historical problem. Therefore, when examining local linguistic communities, linguistic change "must be historicized in local terms as to what the particular linkages of social formation are, and how the linguistic norm is affected and informs those formations"



(Silverstein, 1996b). To accomplish this, we must develop a localized understanding of the social and linguistic situations in which the local linguistic community operates. Through detailed analyses of socio-demographic, ethnographic and social network data, we form a localized, community internal understanding of the relevant trends and internal subgroups in the community under study. It is important to identify the various subgroups (i.e., the social networks and social pattern behaviors), the trends in population shifts, and historical events, as well as the ideological and material orientation of the community members to the local linguistic community. By developing such an historical socio-demographic and ethnographic profile of the community, we may explore questions of social and linguistic transformation with the possibility of pinpointing factors which lead to linguistic changes (whether in progress or completed).

### 3. Localizing the Actuation Question and the Community

In addressing the actuation question, it is also important to recognize the potential problems if we bias our assumptions of linguistic change to be confined to the possibility of telescoping or expanding. While from the single perspective of the analysis of the linguistic norm, without consideration of its inherently bound social context, this may appear to be an entirely appropriate approach. However, such an approach prevents us from addressing the question of the actuation of change, because it restricts the type of data which we may consider due to a priori assumptions about the directional and system internal consequences of linguistic change. Rather, we need to actively recognize that just as social behavior and social change may take a variety of forms, linguistic behavior and change may also take a variety of forms. This view of linguistic change is not novel, it merely echoes that which has been proposed by numerous scholars including: Bloomfield (1933), Sturtevant (1927); Mathesius (1911); Labov (1981); among many others.

## 4. Community & Dialect Emergence in Thyborøn

### 4.1. Data Collection

My findings are based on data from an eight year research project using an interdisciplinary approach to understand and detail change in a local linguistic community. The research that I have conducted documents the life cycle of a unique, contact induced dialect in the small, recently developed, single-industry community of Thyborøn, Denmark. The data collected include: 75 sociolinguistic interviews; 32 ethnographic interviews, of which 27 include social network profiles; demographic data on all 3,797 residents during the developmental years of 1890-1955; and the compilation of a social history from 1500-1996. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, only a small subset of the data can be presented today. A comprehensive exploration of the community is detailed in Lane (1997a).

Comparing the demographic and social network models to a social history, I determined times of intensive changes, and significant factors operational during those changes. Given the knowledge that a contact resultant dialect emerged in this community, I explored how cohort effects lead to varying types of social changes and linguistic accommodation, which, in turn, resulted in the emergence and more recent transformation of the local dialect of Thyborønnsk.

### 4.2. The Emergence of Thyborøn and Thyborønnsk

The economic and demographic history of Thyborøn are directly related to the emergence and direction of transformation of the local linguistic norm and the local social constructs and ideology. By examining and understanding the impact of macro-level changes on the community members, we begin to understand the motivations for and the actuation of change, both socially and linguistically.

While the strength of the ties of individuals to their community may fluctuate over time, the central ideologies formed during the community's emergence are likely to be passed along from generation to generation, just as some of the linguistic



markers are likely to be passed along from generation to generation. In other words, since both the degree of affinity to a community and the degree of use of sociolinguistic markers may vary over time, if we are to understand and predict why changes (social and/or linguistic) arise, we must understand the larger sociocultural context in which the individuals operate. We are all affected by our environment and affect it in return. The resulting linguistic changes of various types of sociocultural shifts can best be understood if one is oriented as to the present situation in the local linguistic community in light of its multidimensional history and perduring modes of normativity.

The development of the dialect of Thyborønsk is mirrored in the development of community mores and identity by the Thyborøn residents. What is especially remarkable about Thyborønsk is the shallow time depth of its history and the various results of contact phenomena. Thyborøn's physical and social emergence dates back to the last decades of the 1800's. During the period of 1890 to 1970, the population grew at an average of 53% every five years. This intensive population growth was due to massive internal migration, encouraged by the physical and economic emergence of the new fishing harbor and industry in Thyborøn. Since the early 1980's the population curve has plateaued, remaining at approximately 2,600 inhabitants. By the mid 1900's, Thyborøn had become the fifth largest fishing harbor in Denmark, then one of the world's top producers and distributors of fish. Despite the decline of the fishing industry since the 1970's, Thyborøn has remained primarily a single-industry fishing community. All other businesses either service or rely on this industry, meaning that they too are dependent upon the economic wellness of fishing for their own livelihood. Economic wellness speaks to the permanency of the local population, which is related to the aging profile of the community and the possible obsolescence of the local identity and dialect.

As a result of the failing local single-industry economy, the population has declined. The majority of younger adults leave Thyborøn to seek employment and educational opportunities elsewhere, and they generally do not move back (cf. Lane 1996a, b; 1997a, b, c). Those residents who do remain in Thyborøn express important similarities and differences in their ideological

orientation to Thyborøn and to the dialect of Thyborønsk. More specifically, while they share a fierce pride in their local identity, that of being a *Thyborønboere*, 'those who live in Thyborøn', they exhibit differences in the distribution of variable features across internally defined groups based on age and sex. However, all of the residents still share a large set of highly localized linguistic features, and still share what can easily be identified as the dialect of Thyborønsk. The residents' sociolinguistic differences are more a matter of degree than quality. It is likely that we are witnessing social and linguistic change in progress. It is hoped that the fortunate timing of this research may offer us a chance to refute the prediction set forth in Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968:186) that due to "the number of factors which influence change: it is likely that all explanations [of the actuation problem] to be advanced in the near future will be after the fact."

## 5. The Sociolinguistics of Change

Let us now turn to a brief exploration of some of the similarities and differences in ideology and social behavior which are evidenced in the linguistic behavior of a few internally defined groups of Thyborøn residents.

For present purposes, we will only be considering three groups of residents: (1) the younger group of adult females; (2) the younger group of adult males; and (3) the middle group of adult females. Guided by ethnologic and ethnographic models proposed by Højrup (1983a, b) and Pedersen (1994), I conducted detailed analyses of the social history and network data for Thyborøn (cf. Lane 1997a). As I have detailed elsewhere (cf. Lane 1997a, b; 1996a), only members within a generational group experience particular socio-historical events at similar life stages, hence with similar orientations to the events. The life-stage at which group members experience socio-historical events is crucial to that group's collective orientation to the events, and, in turn, to the effect which those events may have on their orientation to the community. These groups thereby define generational differences within Thyborøn based on the residents' own contrastive and collaborative experiences. Three groups, labeled 1 through 3, were identified: Group 1: 65+ years old; Group 2: 40 to 65 years old;



and Group 3: 16 to 40 years old. Additionally there is a clear division based on sex, which is most absolute for Group 1 and becomes weaker as we move from Group 2 to Group 3. This division translates into a fairly segregated community where the number and type of male to female social relations differ depending on one's generational grouping. Unfortunately time prohibits a thorough discussion of why this small group of people are so stratified; but I refer you to Lane (1997a).

Time and socio-historical events have impacted the degree to which males and females operate in the same networks. The youngest generation, Group 3, interact more frequently with the opposite sex, while maintaining some traditional network pattern behaviors, that of favoring same sex network ties. The linguistic result of these changes will be briefly explored as we note that the younger women appear to be leading the change towards a more non-localized linguistic norm, and their male generational counterparts appear to be lagging behind in some cases, and exhibiting linguistic behavior more typical of the middle generation, or Group 2.

### 5.1. Linguistic Patterns - Old and New

Let us briefly consider three of the phonological rules and a short list of lexical items which are central to the Thyborøn dialect. The phonological rules are relevant because they index local linguistic community allegiance, and they have important lexical, morphological and/or morphosyntactic ramifications. Furthermore, these four items support interesting points raised in Labov (1981) about the relationship of the individual speaker to the type of linguistic change (Neogrammarian regular sound change or lexical diffusion), hence the level of awareness at which the linguistic change in progress is taking place, and the ramifications of the indexical nature of the affected forms within the denotational code.

1. Palatalization of stops in word initial position when followed by a minus low vowel:  
C[+ stop] -> C[+stop, + palatal] / \_\_ V[-low]

2. No diphthongization (i.e. breaking) of Common Scandinavian short /e/. Of particular indexical value is the Thyborøn form [ɛ], 'I'. Presently, among the Group 3 females, this form variably competes with the non-localized ('Standard Danish') form, [jai].
3. As Jakobson (1952) noted, Danish voiced stops weakened to fricatives in post root positions (i.e. d -> ð, b -> β, g -> ɣ). In Thyborøn, a number of other sound changes and phonotactic requirements conspired to further lenite the weakened stops to glides which regressively assimilated to the preceding vowel, and in some cases deleted (apparently lexically determined) (i.e. d -> ð -> w/j/null, b -> β -> w/j/null, g -> ɣ -> w/j/null). By extension, the liquids and the fricative pair [v] and [f] were included among the class of weakened stops, and also regressively assimilated to the preceding vowel, becoming a glide in the second part of a diphthong (i.e., r/l -> w/j/null and v/f -> w/j/null).
4. Innovative forms arose such as: (a) *ellers*, 'otherwise', as [hɛsn] or [hɛlsn] ('Standard Danish' form is [ɛlɔːs]); (b) *tolv*, 'twelve', as [tɔlʔ] ('Standard Danish' form is [tɔlʔ]); (c) *vejr*, 'weather', as [waiɔ] ('Standard Danish' form is [veʔɪ]); (d) *synes*, 'believe', as [tʰwʔs] or [trwʔs] ('Standard Danish' form is [sɔnəs]); among others.

Table 1 offers some phonetically transcribed examples of these linguistic features from the data set for the three subgroups of Group 2 females, Group 3 males, and Group 3 females. Unfortunately, the coding of these and other variables is just being completed and, as such, regression analyses have yet to be applied to the data (these quantitative results will be available in January 1997).

	Group 2 Females	Group 3 Males	Group 3 Females	English Translations
1. Palatalization	g <sup>o</sup> /g <sup>i</sup> /g <sup>o</sup> ʃjɛlʔ kji.nə ɛ	g <sup>o</sup> /g <sup>i</sup> ʃjɛlʔ kji.nə ɛ	g <sup>o</sup> /g <sup>i</sup> sɛlʔ kɛnə ɛ/ʃai	'do' 'self' 'know' 'I'
2. 1st person sg. pronoun, 'I' as [ɛ]	g <sup>o</sup> wt mai/mɛ	g <sup>o</sup> wt mai/mɛ	giwt/gi.f mai	'married' 'with'
3. Consonant weakening, assimilation, or deletion	(a) hɛlsn/ɛlʔɛrs (b) * (c) *	(a) ɛlɛrs (b) tɔl/tɔlʔ (c) wailə (d) tɔwʔs	(a) ɛlɛrs (b) tɔlʔ (c) veʔɪ (d) tɔwʔs/twɔs	(a) 'otherwise' (b) 'twelve' (c) 'weather' (d) 'believe'
4. Lexical items				

Table 1. Phonetically transcribed examples of the four points under consideration by three subgroups of Thyborøn residents (\*\* indicates no example currently available from the data set).

In considering Table 1, we note that despite the compressed subset of data, we are able to locate trends in the linguistic behavior of the residents. While there are differences between the three groups' linguistic behavior, there are also a number of shared features. This is a crucial point in that we witness that the denotational code is perduring, and that the ebb and flow of change (i.e. the variability of features) is not the sole domain of any one group of residents (nor is fixed as those who subscribe to age-grading may predict). There continues to be a number of forms which index a group member's participation in the larger social grouping, the local linguistic community of Thyborøn. Examples of this are seen in the forms for: 'do', 'I', 'with', 'otherwise', 'twelve', and 'believe'.

## 5.2. The Actuation of Linguistic Change in Thyborøn

In addressing the actuation question, we turn our attention to the differences exhibited among the internally defined groups of community members. As sociolinguists, we are able to immediately pinpoint the suspected linguistic changes in, for example, the forms for: 'self', 'I', 'with', 'otherwise', and 'weather'. We notice that linguistic differences exist along the lines of both sex and age; that the Group 3 males share features with both the Group 2 and Group 3 females; and that when it comes to the most non-localized forms (i.e. what could be labeled as the most 'Standard Danish' forms), it is the Group 3 females who lead in this type of dialect change, namely in exhibiting the highest number of such forms.

These differences are certainly of interest, and together with the results of the quantitative analyses, a complete description may be presented of the synchronic state of Thyborøn and the direction of the changes in progress. If we, as sociolinguists, wish to address the actuation question, as this paper proposes, we need to pose the following research question: *Why* are the features distributed in this way, and *what* is going on in the community to affect such change?

As discussed, we begin by exploring the question of change from a perspective which explores all the possible pressures



from a macro-social level as being potential catalysts to the emergence of pressures at the micro-social level. The way in which the pressures are interpreted by the local linguistic community's residents, and what form their reactions to the pressures take, can only be understood after one has developed a localized socio-historical profile of the community.

I would like to offer a synopsis of an interdisciplinary examination into how the internal modes of normativity, external socio-economic pressures, the ebb and flow of historical and demographic events, macro and micro social changes, discursive interactions and social cognition, all combine to produce a cohort effect which results in the actuation of change. The interdisciplinary approach proffers a means to understanding why the social changes occurring in Thyborøn exist, and why and how these changes are reflected in linguistic change. While this certainly seems like a mouthful, I hope you will agree that the bark is worse than the bite.

In order to accomplish the aforementioned task in the remaining time, I offer the following points:

1. By the late 1800's we can talk about Thyborøn as a community because of the bonds that kept the people there despite terrible conditions and natural disasters. The physical, economic and social struggles, which the residents faced, created a sense of community by bonding them together in order to survive.
2. The economic and demographic booms experienced by the Thyborøn residents from 1920 to the late 1960's, directly impacted the various types of accommodation which occurred in the local linguistic community. The result was the emergence of a shared denotational norm, which further strengthened the residents' "social concepts of groupness" (Silverstein 1996c), similarly, their sense of "contrastive self-identification" (Labov 1972).
3. Based on the traditionally highly stratified nature of the fishing industry, a parallel stratification between

men and women's social networks arose in Thyborøn. The social constructs were influenced by the industrial constructs because Thyborøn was, and still is, a single-industry economy. Men and women would primarily develop and maintain social network ties that exhibit dramatic asymmetry, favoring same sex ties, with the exception of the immediate family.

4. Due to the local economy's strength, traditional constructs and ideologies were maintained until the 1970's, when macro-social pressures, such as oil embargoes and quota systems, drastically altered life in Thyborøn. These external pressures translated into changes in material orientation to Thyborøn. Namely, residents had to consider looking elsewhere for economic and occupational security. Additionally, the wide spread social changes of the 1960's and 70's translated into increased opportunities for women and, in turn, into changes in the social pattern behavior of Thyborøn's youngest generation.
5. Material and ideological orientations will naturally ebb and flow in their degree of strength of more versus less localized affinity. In Thyborøn, the tide has gone out. The youngest generation are balancing their inherited social understanding of the importance and pride of being a *Thyborønboere*, with the pressures from without which demand an awareness of the non-local social, economic and linguistic norms which disfavor highly localized norms.

The culmination of these five points, as well as much of the details necessarily omitted, presents us with a cohort effect in the cycles of social behavior. When individual cycles converge, defining moments in the life of the community are created. These moments are not just the points when both social and linguistic change are most likely to occur, but because they are the focal points for group identity, they are also the cause of change. Orientation to these focal points defines membership in the

community and structures internally relevant subgroups, such as generations. These notions are necessarily complex and multidimensional. The possibility of addressing the actuation of change depends on our ability to understand the interaction of all of these factors at a more abstract level of social history. By viewing social history in all its reflexes from a more abstract and multidimensional perspective, we understand why and how society and language change.

We witness in Table 1 that the Group 3 men, whose social network patterns are more similar to traditional local norms, display the most similarities in linguistic behavior with the Group 2 women (and other older Groups not presented herein). The Group 3 females, whose social networks, personal ideologies, and linguistic attitudes are more divergent from traditional patterns, display the most non-localized linguistic behavior. However, we must recall that sociolinguistic pictures are not black and white. While it is true that the Group 3 women are leading in the number of linguistic features which are non-local, they still share important features with the other groups. Similarly, the Group 3 men exhibit this see-sawing effect, as they maintain features with highly localizable indexical value while they move towards the incorporation of the newest Thyborønsk, which shares more features with other (i.e., non-local) linguistic communities.

## 6. Summary

Friedrich (1971) and Mathesius (1911) have shown that historical and dialectological variability are linked to synchronic variability across register within individual dialects. Although variability can be a key factor in diachronic and synchronic linguistic change, as shown above where the variable reflexes of a sound change also index membership in internally defined subgroups; variability is also a stable element and is inherent in language. It is important to keep in mind that the mere existence of variability does not indicate change in progress. However, the existence of linguistic variability along with notable concurrent social changes can be an indicator of change in progress.

The multidimensional model employed herein is grounded in ethnographically informed empirical studies of macro- and

micro-societal data from ethnologic and social network research that shed interesting and important light on the sociolinguistic situation. Locally historicized, linguistically external evidence provide a framework for exploring linguistic change from an integrated and empirically informed perspective which offers us a means for addressing the actuation question for local linguistic communities.

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