Speech style and education distinguish the grammatical classes of (ING)

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Language infuses our ability to understand and to express understanding of the world. People use language in myriad ways while interacting. I investigate a particularity of these interactions, *style shifting*, within the sociolinguistic interview. I evaluate how differing levels of contextual formality shape a speaker’s linguistic decisions, focusing on the (ING) (*workin’*—*working*) speech variable. Stylistic and linguistic factors condition (ING); my work addresses whether these factors interact. I analyze (ING)’s grammatical categories—nominal, verbal, and quantifier—in Philadelphia English and show differentiated conditioning across all three categories. I argue (ING)’s variant stylistic conditioning supports a conception of (ING) as more than one variable and venture (ING) may be less stable than widely believed.

Data come from a roughly age/sex-balanced sample of 40 speakers from the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus (Labov & Rosenfelder 2011). Every instance of (ING) was coded for pronunciation and grammatical class before being classified, following Labov’s (2001b) Style Decision Tree, into 1 of 8 contextual styles, grouped as “Careful” or “Casual”. Previous studies indicate correlations between “casual” speech markers in “Casual” contexts and “formal” markers in “Careful” contexts. I predicted such a correlation for (ING).

I fit a logistic regression model to predict (ING) variant used from birth year, preceding segment, following segment, speaker gender, style, grammatical class, level of educational attainment and lexical frequency. I tested for birth year/education and speaker gender/style interactions. Every predictor except style yields significant main effects, and a significant birth year/education interaction appears (revealing decreasing /ing/ rates over time for speakers only attending high school). Following Tagliamonte (2004) and using the full model’s predictors, I fit separate models for each grammatical class. Differences in predictor significance across nominal, verbal and quantifier (ING) suggest external factors condition each grammatical form differently and that internal factors condition quantifier (ING) differently than nominal and verbal (ING). This supports nominal and verbal (ING)’s divergent “social profiles” (Tagliamonte 2004:399; Tamminga 2014) and quantifier (ING)’s contrastive behavior (Labov 2001a:88). The speaker gender/style interaction revealed women style-shift more dramatically than men do.

The stylistic differentiation I found between (ING)’s grammatical categories supports the emergent claim that more than one linguistic process fuels observed variation between –*ing* and –*in’* (Tagliamonte 2004:400, Tamminga 2014:5). Birth year’s significant main effect and its interaction with education (as in Horvath 1985 and Labov 1972) challenge (ING)’s stability (summarized Labov 2001a:86). Analysis of larger corpora may yield further understanding of (ING)’s socio-indexical meanings.
References