

Linguistics 157. Innovations: Variation and Change.
Winter quarter 2007. MWF 10-10:50, in 160-315.
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New types of expressions appear all the time. Here are some kinds of innovations, with a few examples from English (a few fairly recent, some up to a few hundred years old):

1. Morphological innovations: THEMSELF; fusions like WANNA and GONNA
2. Assignment of lexical items to morphological classes (DWARFS or DWARVES?) and morphosyntactic categories (E(-)MAIL as count or mass?)
3. New lexical items: new “whack” adjectives (FREAK, SKETCH, W(H)ACK); SUPE (UP), a reinterpretation of SOUP UP under the influence of SUPER-
4. New uses of old lexical items: determiner A LOT OF, innovative uses of ALL (as intensifier and quotative)
5. New idioms and formulas, for instance snowclones (“X is the new Y”)
6. Extension of old constructions to new contexts: extension of Verb Phrase Ellipsis (“I said I’ll do it, and I will”) to infinitival TO (“I said I’ll do it, but I don’t want to”), extension of the locative independent possessive (“Let’s meet at Sandy’s”) to personal pronouns (“Let’s meet at mine”)
7. New constructions: Isis (“The thing is is that we’ve got to go now”), TryAndV (“I’ll try and see what the problem is”)

How do these new types of expressions arise? By a variety of mechanisms, among them regularization and generalization, several types of lexical semantic change, the conversion of implicature into semantic content, grammaticalization, reinterpretation, blending, conventionalization of errors, reinforcement of semantic content, playful variation, and straightforward invention.

How do they then spread from person to person and from context to context? The major force in spread from person to person is usually taken to be the value of linguistic forms as indicators of social group membership; people compose personas and social identities using linguistic variables as raw material. Sometimes, though, the spread seems to be much closer to random. And the spread from context to context – from the specific context in which you first encounter an expression to other contexts, from speech to writing, from informal contexts to formal ones – also seems to vary considerably from case to case, with each innovation having its own history.

What is their further history, as they compete with other expressions and confront the resistance of language-regulating authorities to innovations in general? Some innovations remain socially or stylistically marked over long spans of time, some spread socially and stylistically, even

becoming neutral in these respects and setting off a retreat by older competitors, and some retreat themselves, eventually going out of fashion.

We will pick an assortment of specific cases to look at in this seminar, trying to get as much variety in the material as possible. The emphasis will be on learning by doing, on consulting the literature as it becomes relevant, and on working in groups (small or large).

3-4 units

Letter or Credit/No Credit