Keeping safe by talking different:
why it's not always good to sound like the neighbours

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Traditional explanations for language change have tended to rely on such mechanisms as production errors on the part of the speaker, processing errors on the part of the hearer, or simply gradual drift. Doubtless these play a part, but such explanations do not take into account the salience of even quite minor variation in speech patterns: the most linguistically unsophisticated speaker is well aware that we do not all talk alike. Linguistic change need not be purely accidental: the development of noticeable accents is advantageous to the human species, as variation can be a means of defence by cooperative organisms against exploitation (Enquist & Leimar 1993, Dunbar 1996).

Computer simulations (e.g. Nettle 1999) have added support to this hypothesis, while classic sociolinguistic studies have explored the indexical functions of linguistic variables and their selection (e.g. Labov 1963). Work on cooperative dialogue (e.g. Garrod & Doherty 1994, Pardo 2006) has suggested that speakers tend to align their speech patterns with those of their conversation partner, while other studies have shown that speakers who are directly challenged may attempt to dissociate themselves linguistically from the challenger (Bourhis & Giles 1977).

I present the results of a pilot study that explicitly compares cooperative with competitive speech and suggests that speakers alter their speech patterns depending on whether there are working with or against the same conversational partner.

References

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