

Beyond ‘media influence’

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The ‘mediated innovation model’ proposed by David Sayers in this issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* comes in a period of lively debate on the role of media in the social life of language. As Sayers points out, the question of media influence in language change has been largely marginalized in variationist sociolinguistics, neglected by some researchers, forcefully rejected by others. But in the last few years, scholars from various sociolinguistic subfields have examined media as an important site of sociolinguistic heterogeneity, innovation and change (cf. Androutsopoulos 2014a; Stuart-Smith 2012). Both the complexity of the processes involved and the dearth of relevant research make the relationship of media and linguistic change – in a sense that includes, but is not limited to the variationist understanding – a thorny and intriguing subject, which Sayers’ contribution sets out to address by focusing on two points: a review of previous studies on the role of media in linguistic innovations in English and a ‘mediated innovation model’ that is visualized and outlined in theoretical terms. I discuss them in turn before moving on to a critical discussion of his proposed framework.

Sayers’ classification distinguishes five approaches to linguistic innovations, ranked by the theoretical and empirical relevance they assign to the media, especially television. The first two approaches make hardly any reference to the media, whereas the fifth approach, represented by the research of Stuart-Smith and her associates (cf. Stuart-Smith 2011, 2012), makes the question of media influence on speech centre stage. The implicational ordering of this overview offers a handy scheme that could also be used to examine how the media has been positioned with regard to other aspects of language in society. As researchers in this area are well aware, a lot of sociolinguistic research that references the media as a potential factor in linguistic change does not examine media language as such, but rather attempts to operationalize the construct of ‘media influence’ on spoken language in the community in terms of ‘consumption’ of or ‘exposure’ to media, particularly television. Other researchers in sociolinguistics and social dialectology have evoked the notion of media influence in a post-hoc manner, in order to provide an explanation for attested patterns of linguistic innovation and change such as the shift from local dialects to standard variety in the second half of the 20th century in continental Europe (cf. Lameli 2005 for German; Kristiansen 2014 for Danish;

and chapters in Kristiansen and Coupland 2011). This kind of approach corresponds to Sayers' Approach 3, which evokes the notion of media influence to explain patterns of linguistic diffusion, even though neither media language nor audience engagement is empirically examined.

Sayers' Approach 4, which compares speech data and media data, is particularly promising despite its misleading heading (the 'media data' in question are also speech data). The fact that it is represented by only two studies (of which one is unpublished) goes to show that comparisons of this sort are still difficult to carry out as long as we lack adequate corpora on both sides of the issue. Linguists who do not work with media language may think that compiling a corpus of media language is an easy task, but this is not the case when it comes to an informed selection and contextualization of data. Contextual parameters such as type of media, broadcasting institution, target audience and genre have an impact on the language styles disseminated by broadcast media (cf. Bell 2001, 2011). Therefore, confirming or dismissing the media influence hypothesis cannot be based on data from just one single television show or series. Drawing generalizations requires as much caution here as in any other area of sociolinguistic research. This confirms a point raised by Sayers and other current work: in order to understand the role of media in linguistic change, we need to go beyond spoken language in the community and examine both media language and audience practices of media engagement. Taking media language and discourse into consideration is necessary because today's mediascapes feature a vast range of sociolinguistic styles and representations of speakerhood for audiences to respond to. And looking at media engagement practices is necessary as it is by now established that the bottom line of any potential impact of media on non-mediated community speech is not consumption or 'exposure' *per se* but situated audience engagement with specific media narratives and characters (cf. Stuart-Smith 2011).

The presentation of the 'hypothetical mediated innovation model' that follows up on the discussion of the five approaches is rather short and not accompanied by a case study to demonstrate how the model would work in empirical practice. The model's visual structure basically replicates the sender-message-receiver pattern that is familiar from communication models in the social sciences. Its three nodes, laid out on the vertical axis, are termed 'source speech community', 'media texts', and 'adopting speech community'. The link between source community and media texts is termed 'mediation', which Sayers defines as the uptake of vernacular speech forms by media texts, and the link from media texts to adopting communities is termed 'broadcast', defined as the process by which media texts make innovative linguistic features available to a new audience community or population. The term 'social networks', which appears in the surrounding visual space, indicates the sociolinguistic contexts in which mediated innovations are negotiated.

One issue here is terminology: Sayers' usage of 'mediation' and 'broadcast' is not compatible to established meanings of these terms in other disciplines. While 'mediation' is notoriously polysemous across humanities and social sciences, Sayers' 'broadcast' is particularly idiosyncratic in that it denotes semiotic features of mass-mediated messages rather than the institutions that produce and disseminate these messages. Far from suggesting that linguistics ought to sheepishly follow the usage of other disciplines, I nonetheless believe that some consideration of terminology across the border would be conducive to interdisciplinary dialogue. In addition, the model's components remain underspecified in my reading. For example, the bottom part of the visualization suggests that linguistic forms from a speech community find access into media texts. But who produces these media texts, what kinds of speakers do they represent, and how do they frame the vernacular features they contain in terms of e.g. genre or narrative? As researchers of media discourse are well aware, the relation between media texts and the language practices in the communities these texts claim to represent, on the one hand, and the communities that consume these texts, on the other, entails very complex issues of audience design (Bell 1984), representation (Hall 1977) and style (Coupland 2007), which are neither visualized in the model nor addressed in the discussion. Sayers points out that his model affords a visualization of 'methodologies used to research media influence in language change', but this is not evident in the model itself. There are very different methods for studying 'mediation' and 'broadcast', the two processes represented by arrows in the model. The uptake of vernacular features in media discourse can be examined quantitatively, e.g. by comparing a sample of relevant media talk to a corpus of community speech, or qualitatively, by focusing on the contextualization of these features in media genres. Likewise, the adoption of media language features by audiences can be explored quantitatively, thereby drawing on questionnaires and speech production experiments (cf. Stuart-Smith 2011) or qualitatively in terms of the interactional appropriation of media language features. The model's arrows erase these differences. Therefore, the author's claims about the model's potential use as a backdrop for comparative analysis are neither supported by its visual design nor exemplified by a practical example.

Against this backdrop, the key question is whether Sayers' framework can 'cross the Rubicon', in his own words, i.e. go beyond limitations of previous theorizing and offer an integrative perspective on the issues it addresses. In my reading, the 'mediated innovation model' moves towards, but does not quite achieve a turning point in theorizing the complex and multi-layered impact of media, in the widest sense of the term, on sociolinguistic developments in contemporary societies. I suggest there are two reasons for this: the model's limitation to evidence from just one language, i.e. English, and its understanding of 'media influence' within a variationist approach to language change. I discuss them in turn in the remainder of this commentary.

First, the focus on English. Since neither the title nor the keywords of Sayers' paper limit the scope of his claims to the English language, his framework is in principle understood as potentially applicable to a broader range of languages. In practice, the paper discusses two cases of diffusion of linguistic features across varieties of English: a small number of phonological variables that diffuse from Southern to Northern varieties of British English, and the spread of the quotative *be like* across Englishes world-wide. Sociolinguistically speaking, these represent two distinct types of diffusion. One is diffusion across varieties that are roofed by a common standard language and partake in the same order of indexicality (Blommaert 2007) within a given nation-state. The second represents the transnational spread of innovations within a polycentric language (Clyne 1992) whose varieties are located in different nation-states and embedded in distinct orders of indexicality. These differences are too complex to be boiled down to a matter of continuous or discontinuous geographical setting, as Sayers seems to suggest. While the case of *be like* may well be instructive for similar developments in polycentric languages such as German, Spanish or French, I don't see what it has to offer to the study of linguistic innovations in small, sociolinguistically centralized societies such as e.g. Greece or Denmark.

Moreover, the focus on English erases the fact that in late modernity, the English language itself is a key resource of global linguistic innovations for basically any other language (or speech community, depending on one's perspective). From their viewpoint, English represents a specific type of input for sociolinguistic innovation and change: a globally available resource with globally familiar points of cultural and intertextual reference, which is locally recontextualized in many different ways at the structure and discourse level. The introduction of different layers of English linguistic material in other-language speech communities has always been associated with various types of mediated communication (Hjarvard 2004). Think of lexical Anglicisms in the press, non-standard registers of English that diffuse globally with hip-hop lyrics, the calquing of English formulaic expressions in Hollywood film dubbing, or so-called internet memes whose understanding requires considerable idiomatic competence in English. These processes show striking translinguistic parallels in terms of globally circulating resources and patterns of repertoire shift. But all this is erased from the picture by limiting the evidence deemed relevant to a 'mediated innovation model' to English-speaking countries. I therefore argue that as soon as we exit the small circle of Anglophone speech communities, the English language becomes highly *untypical* with respect to a range of globally observable processes of contact-induced innovation and change, in which media play a role.

Note that Sayers is quite reflexive on the limitations of his model. He self-critically acknowledges his focus on 'native Anglophone societies' as well as television and film. Yet these issues ought, in my view, to be addressed at a fundamental level in the conception of a framework for the study of media and

language change. For such a framework to be cross-linguistically adaptable, starting from English may not be useful, for the reasons outlined above. And a framework that starts by thinking about the media in rather traditional terms – broadcast media that target mass audiences with products that largely consist of professionally produced, standardized language – may overlook the specific conditions of participatory networked communication (cf. Androutsopoulos 2011). The internet makes the trajectories of semiotic circulation and diffusion too complex and unpredictable to be handled by the framework's notion of 'media texts'.

My second point departs from the observation that the 'mediated innovation model' limits itself to the traditional framing of language change in variationist sociolinguistics, i.e. structural changes at the level of sociolinguistic variables within a single language. Wordings like 'within the system' or 'from other systems' as well as the selected examples are telling in this regard. This adoption of a monoglot, structural perspective on language variation and change goes hand in hand with the uncritical reproduction of the 'influence' metaphor, a trope that assigns 'the media' – note the implied limitation to mass media – the power to influence 'language'. While Sayers' framework on the one hand brings the speakers back into the picture in terms of audience engagement with media texts, it still keeps them under the influence of an undifferentiated thing called 'the media'.

I argue that the notions of 'the media' and 'media influence' have become too narrow to address the role of media institutions, technologies, discourses, and practices in contemporary sociolinguistic developments. As the current discussion in media and communication studies suggests, theorizing the media in socio-cultural change entails unpacking the bracket term 'the media' into finer theoretical and analytical distinctions (cf. Couldry 2008). Two concepts that are used to this aim are mediation (though in a sense that differs from Sayers' usage) and mediatization. In communication studies, these the two terms are not always clearly distinguished (cf. Couldry 2008; Hepp 2014; Krotz 2009). When a distinction is made, mediatization refers to the role of mediated communication in processes of socio-cultural change at a higher level of abstraction, whereas mediation focuses on the material and semiotic conditions of communicative action. These notions will be useful to sociolinguists in developing a theoretical vocabulary that goes beyond technologically determined ideas about media (cf. Androutsopoulos 2014a).

Refining our notions of media and mediation is, in turn, crucial in order to reassess the nexus of media influence and featural language change, which has dominated sociolinguistic imagination so far (cf. Herring 2003). Indeed, the interest in media in the context of linguistic change has been so closely associated with the variationist conception of language change and the concomitant 'influence' metaphor that other views and approaches are often not sufficiently acknowledged. Fresh ideas on language, media and socio-cultural change currently originate in interactional sociolinguistics,

linguistic anthropology, media discourse, and communication studies (cf. chapters in Androutsopoulos 2014b). But the orientation of the 'mediated innovation model' to variationist sociolinguistics goes hand in hand with a closure from this impetus, as indicated for instance by the fact that research on audience engagement with media is positioned as a new development, even though it goes back to the mid 1990s (cf. Shankar 2004; Spitulnik 1997; and recent papers in Ayaß and Gerhardt 2012).

Integrating insights from a range of research fields is, in my view, indispensable in order to develop a broader research programme on sociolinguistic change in mediatized societies. Part of this programme is the very notion of sociolinguistic change, which positions linguistic repertoires, language practices and language ideologies as interrelated objects of inquiry on the same footing with structural change (cf. Androutsopoulos 2014a; Coupland 2009). Sayers does move in this integrative direction by including media engagement practices into his model, thereby following Stuart-Smith (2011, 2012). But language ideology and linguistic repertoires as dimensions of change are absent from his argument, thereby perpetuating the gap between language and metalanguage and the focus on single linguistic variables, which characterize variationist accounts of language change.

Ultimately, Sayers' approach points to the right direction: that of broader thinking and methodological synergy. But I believe more needs to be done in developing an integrative approach to the study of media and language change. In my view, such an approach entails four elements (cf. Androutsopoulos 2014a):

- First, it does not prioritize by default structural change within one particular language, but approaches structure, repertoire, practice, and ideology as interrelated dimensions of sociolinguistic change.
- Second, it does not limit the operational conception of 'media' to mass media and in particular television but develops an inclusive perspective on institutions, technologies and practices of mediation as elements of the sociolinguistic condition of late-modern societies.
- Third, it synthesizes relevant insights from the entire range of socio-cultural linguistics, from variationism to minority language studies.
- And fourth, it draws on findings from as many languages and speech communities as possible, the rationale behind this being that the role of media in sociolinguistic change is so multi-layered and complex that its understanding cannot be limited to just a single language.

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