James Milroy & Lesley Milroy (1985):

Linguistic Change,
Social Network
And Speaker Innovation

by Valentin Deyringer
Outline

- Linguistic change
  - Main fields
  - Another study
- Speaker innovation
- Networks
- Role of Speakers
Outline

- Research of James & Lesley Milroy
  - Phonological System of Belfast
- Examples
  - Micro-level example
  - Macro-level example
- Conclusion
  - Of J. & L. Milroy
  - My own opinion
Linguistic change

- Two approaches:
  - States of language
  - Quantitative linguistics
Linguistic change

- Result of the operation of regular phonetic rules
- Controlled by extra-linguistic factors
  - Age
  - Sex
  - Social status
  - Geographical location of speaker
- Spontaneous speech affected earlier than more careful styles
Linguistic change

- Every living language undergoes constant change
- Visible in different states of languages
- Caused by successful speaker innovation
Main fields

- Universal Constraints
  - Universal rules
- Transition Problem
  - Intermediate stages between two states
- Embedding Problem
  - Context of change
Main fields

- Evaluation Problem
  - Reactions caused by change
- Actuation problem
  - Why does the change take place
    - In the language/dialect it does
    - At the time it does
    - Not in other languages at the same time
    - At another time in the same language
- Those fields do overlap
Another Study

- Penelope Eckert
  - back vowel chain shift in Soulatan Gascon
- Change in waves
- One word class at a time
- Items lagging behind as stylistic variants
- Earlier and later states may overlap
“It is not languages that innovate it is speakers who innovate.”

- May fail to diffuse beyond speaker
- May diffuse into a community with which the innovator has contact with and go no further
- May then diffuse subsequently into other communities via a further innovator who has ties with both the relevant communities
Speaker Innovation

- May spark off a chain reaction in a language system
- Innovators can not be located precisely
  - Change may have had a long history elsewhere
  - Observation may start at any point in a cycle of change
Networks

- Weak ties
- Strong ties
- Bridges
  - Normally weak ties
  - Only connection between two networks
Networks

Figure 2
A bridge between two networks. ----, Weak ties; ---, strong ties.

SLANG - Linguistic Change, Social Network and Speaker Innovation
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Networks

- Strength of a tie is a combination of:
  - Amount of time
  - Emotional intensity
  - Intimacy
  - Reciprocal services
Role of Speakers

- **Innovators:**
  - More likely to bring inventions into networks
  - Many weak ties
  - Marginal to the group

- **Early adopters:**
  - More likely to adopt changes
  - Many strong ties

- Very difficult to distinguish
Researches of James & Lesley Milroy

- Study of Hiberno-English (Irish English)
- In Belfast and regions nearby
Phonetic System of Belfast

- Representation of phonetic range of /a/ in Belfast vernacular

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[ɛ:]</th>
<th>[æ]</th>
<th>[a]</th>
<th>[ɑ:]</th>
<th>[ɔ:]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bag</td>
<td>back</td>
<td>bat</td>
<td>bad</td>
<td>bad</td>
<td>bad</td>
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<tr>
<td>bang</td>
<td></td>
<td>snap</td>
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<td>hand</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>back</td>
<td>snap</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- **Front only**
- **Back only**
- **Front ~ back**

*Velar environments*  
*Fricative & voiced consonant environments (excluding velars)*  
*Voiceless stop environments (excluding velars); back variants attested only amongst East Belfast youths*

Table 1

Simplified representation of phonetic range of /a/ in Belfast vernacular, using key words
Phonetic System of Belfast

- Representation of phonetic range of /ɛ/ in Belfast vernacular

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mid</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[eː, æ, æː, æ]</td>
<td>[a, æ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bed, bend, best</td>
<td>wet, went</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Fricative and voiced</td>
<td>(Voiceless stop, sonorant +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consonant environments)</td>
<td>voiceless stop environments)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2*

Simplified representation of phonetic range of /ɛ/ in Belfast vernacular, using key words
Micro-Level example

- Backing of /a/
  - Led by east Belfast males
  - Carried by younger female group in the catholic Clonard community
Macro-Level example

- England
  - Weak tie situations
  - English changed since the 12\textsuperscript{th} century
- Iceland
  - Strong tie situation
  - Icelandic altered little
- Sardinia $\leftrightarrow$ Sicily
Conclusion of J. & M. Milroy

- Innovations transmitted via weak ties
- Many weak ties → change rapid
- Prestige not that important
- Innovation vs. Change
- Innovators vs. Early Adopters
Conclusion of J. & M. Milroy

- Limitations
  - Innovation may trigger a series of changes
  - Candidates for innovation?
  - What makes an innovation successful?
  - How does that innovation diffuse and become changes?
My own opinion

- Long & Hard to read
  (at least as non-native speaker)
- Interesting topic
- Noticed even some changes myself
Questions

- Are there any?