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Lifespan change and language change
Gillian Sankoff
University of Pennsylvania

Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (WLH 1968) demonstrated that a plot of the frequency of a linguistic feature following the regular curve of an age distribution could be shown to reflect language change in progress. This discovery is widely accepted as the beginning of the modern reintegration of synchronic and diachronic linguistics. In the 40 years since WLH, many studies combining diachronic evidence with the synchronic analysis of contemporary speech communities attest to the well-foundedness of the concept of apparent time, on which real-time interpretation rests. Modeling the progress of change, however, is complicated by the fact that sociolinguists have not had access to the kind of data that would allow us to factor in the change that may occur for speakers across their lifespans, a factor known as “age grading”. The current paper uses data from a longitudinal study of Montreal French, including the re-recording of the same speakers in 1971, 1984 and 1995, to propose several models of the possible relationships between language change in the community and language change across individual lifespans.
