

# CHANGES IN AN IDIOLECT FROM CHILDHOOD TO MIDDLE AGE

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## 1. BACKGROUND

Since the 1960s, sociolinguists have been investigating dialect change mainly by using the so-called apparent time method, which compares the spoken language of people from different age groups. In recent decades, researchers have begun to test the apparent time method by combining it with the real time method, which concentrates on the influence of time in the language of a certain speech community or certain individuals. When the samples under investigation are collected by using the same principles and represent the same community at different times, the study can be called a trend survey. A more laborious and rarer method is a longitudinal follow-up study of individual informants, a panel survey, which is usually realized as part of a more extensive trend survey.

The panel survey became possible when researchers were able to make sound recordings. The earliest follow-up studies, however, only date back a few decades. They have been made, for example, in Iceland (Thráinsson 1980), Sweden (Sundgren 2002), the United States (Cukor-Avila and Bailey 1996; Labov 1995:101–107), and Canada (Sankoff et al. 2001). In Finland, this approach is applied in the dialectological follow-up project coordinated by the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland which was launched in 1989 and which continues to collect data every ten years in ten different communities (Nuolijärvi and Sorjonen 2005). The studies that have come out in the project so far have already reported results on idiolects (Kurki 2005). In addition, the development of idiolects has been scanned in studies concerning the urban Helsinki dialect (Paunonen 2005) and the rural Häme dialects (Nahkola and Saanilahti 2001).

The panel surveys in Finland and elsewhere have usually been realized by interviewing informants twice within the period of ten or twenty years, rarely longer than this. My study (Palander 2005) is based on a longitudinal study of an idiolect and has so far continued for a total of thirty years; data have been gathered once every six years.

## 2. MATERIAL

The object of study is the spoken language of Pasi, a male informant from eastern Finland, born in 1962. Pasi was born in Enonkoski, which is part of the Savo dialect area, and he has spent most of his life there. His first interview was recorded in 1969, when Pasi was 7 years old. After this, he has been interviewed every six years. The last sample included in this paper dates back to 1999, when Pasi was 37. He has completed basic education and has worked in agriculture and forestry on his home farm. During the most recent interview he worked as a harvest contractor.

In 1999, Pasi's parents, his uncle, and his brother, who all lived on Pasi's home farm, were also interviewed for comparative material. The data also include a short sample of Pasi's grandmother's dialect from 1969; in addition, there exists plenty of detailed information about the language of the grandmother's generation (Palander 1996). Pasi's interview material lasts 5 hours 45 minutes, and the data from the other family members are 2 hours 15 minutes. This has made it possible to apply both the real time and apparent time methods in the study.

## 3. MAIN RESULTS

This study focuses on twenty-one phonetic or phonological features, twenty-four morphological and syntactic features and, in addition, about forty lexical and phraseological features. Some of these are local, some are from the broader dialect area of eastern Finland.

In Finland, the areal dialects are levelling. Specifically, the Savo dialect includes phonological features that clearly differ from standard Finnish. During the last decades, the most local Savo features have gradually given way to the standard or the so-called colloquial variants that are widely used in the western dialects. The western dialects have higher prestige than the eastern ones. In Pasi's speech, the Savo dialect has survived fairly well, but some changes can be noticed.

1. Some older features have died out over generations. Although Pasi used an older version of the dialect when he was a child, his speech now lacks certain features that still exist in his parents' speech, for example, *puukkoja* (partitive, sg. 'sheath-knife', in standard Finnish *puukkoa*).
2. About ten dialect features that were present in Pasi's childhood speech have since then been entirely discarded, for example, the second person plural endings with *-ta*, *-ttä*: *kävittä* 'you went', in standard Finnish *kävitte*.
3. Of the forty-five phonological, morphological, and syntactic features investigated, fifteen have been partly replaced by standard forms. The change in some of them is unexpected and cannot be explained. For example, as a child Pasi used only the rapid speech form *mut* for the word *mutta* 'but', but now 85% of the forms he uses are standard forms. This is surprising because abbreviated forms are becoming more frequent in colloquial speech nationwide.

On the other hand, Pasi's speech largely retains typical Savo features that are clearly declining among young people and among people who have moved away from the area. Such properties include diphthongization (*maa* > *mua* 'earth') and the labialisation of *e* in verbs that include *e* in their stem form (*juoksee* > *juoksoo* 'he/she runs'). There has been a reduction of only 10 percent of such dialect features in Pasi's speech since childhood.

4. Some features (eight in all) have been affected by changes in the dialect and in the general colloquial speech, but not by standard language. It has long been observed that localized features of the East-Savo dialects are giving way to the features of the wider dialect area. This phenomenon is also reflected in the language of an individual. For example, earlier the non-initial combination *ea* was realized as [i:] *korkii* for standard Finnish *korkea* 'high'. Now it is being supplanted by [e:] (*korkee*), which is known in the western but also in many eastern dialects.

It can be observed that if the interrelationships between the variants of a dialect feature change — towards standard language, towards general colloquial speech or because of spontaneous dialect changes — this change will progress in an idiolect by some 20 to 30 percent over thirty years. The intra-dialectal process is accelerated by migration to another dialect area, by education or by change in linguistic contacts. For example, Pasi's brother, who has lived for three years in the western dialect area, has lost some of the typical Savo features almost completely.

5. Thirteen of the investigated features have remained the way they were thirty years ago. Most of them were completely or almost completely dialectal in Pasi's childhood. They include, for example, the personal pronouns (*mie* 'I', *myö* 'we', *työ* 'you', *hyö* 'they', in standard Finnish *minä*, *me*, *te*, *he*).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that if there is a discernible change in the speech of two previous generations, the same trend will continue in the idiolect of the following generation. Moreover, if a feature varies in the idiolect as a child, it will probably change over time.

Pasi's idiolect was most likely to change during his early school years (probably between 8 to 10 years of age) and when he was about to reach adulthood (17 to 19). At both stages his linguistic contacts were extended. At school he was influenced by his schoolmates and teachers, and it was then that many of his old dialect features were dropped. By the time he was 20 he had done his military service, during which he was provided a greater variety of speech models from speakers of completely different dialects. At this stage, several Savo dialect features tended to give way to standard forms.

In middle age, Pasi's speech appears to be stabilizing and partly returning towards the old dialect forms (Sundgren 2002:285–287; Paunonen 2005:183–192).

This is affected by the fact that Pasi's linguistic contacts are primarily in the East-Savo dialect area. The contacts are long-standing and multiplex, and his social network is dense (Milroy 1980:20–21, 49–52). In spite of close contacts, it seems that inevitable changes have occurred in Pasi's vocabulary: he does not use descriptive words as much as he did when he was a child. The old Savo dialect is famous for colourful expressions, but in Pasi's speech the descriptive vocabulary has diminished. However, as an adult, Pasi has found new ways of engaging in conversation. Now he uses more focusing and estimating particles and phrases which seem to be typical to adult language.

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