Dr. Suzanne Wagner – Non-Standard Speech and Higher Education

Although the English language has undergone many changes through the centuries, some of its features have actually stayed the same. One of these is the pronunciation of a final –ing ending as –in’, as in Dunkin’ Donuts or finger-lickin’ good. The –in’ pronunciation has existed in the language since Old English, even though it is popularly reviled as “g-dropping.”

(Studies show that g-dropping is most frequent in the speech of the least educated. Listeners hear it as low-class and lazy. Why do unpopular linguistic phenomena like g-dropping survive? And now that a college education is becoming the norm in America, does this mean the end for g-dropping?

Since 2005, Dr. Suzanne Wagner has been carrying out a longitudinal study of young women in Philadelphia, PA. The study tracks the women’s speech from high school through the post-college years, and compares it with changes going on more generally in the community. At the same time, the study takes into account the women’s social circumstances and their attitudes to their own speech.

“I’ve been recording informal interviews with some young American women since they were in high school, says Dr. Suzanne Wagner, professor of linguistics in the Department of Linguistics, and Germanic, Slavic, Asian, and African Languages. “They’re now in their mid-twenties. They grew up in a neighborhood where g-dropping is very common. All of these women went to college, but none of them stopped g-dropping.”

Dr. Wagner says that the women who went to prestigious colleges that draw students from across the nation did decrease their use of –in’. But the women who went to local colleges continued to use the –in’ pronunciation at a high rate. This effect of college choice was even stronger than the effect of the women’s social class background.”

“Mixing with students from all over America increases the social pressure to use more standard speech,” she says. “The social pressure isn’t as strong at a local college, even though you’re getting the same academic qualification. So g-dropping probably isn’t going to go away, even though the nation is becoming more educated. And that’s because g-dropping, like double negation and many other features of non-standard speech, is also a marker of local identity, sincerity and being down-to-earth.”

She adds that undergraduate and graduate students have been involved in transcribing speech and carrying out acoustic analyses. A new team of undergraduate research assistants, funded by a HARP grant and partly recruited through the Venture database, joined the project for 2012-2013.

Dr. Wagner says that her students are involved in the collection, processing and analysis of data in the lab, and through this work, undergraduate and graduate students have opportunities to learn research skills using real texts and recordings.

“Sociolinguistics is a data-driven discipline,” says Dr. Wagner. “It should and can provide students with multiple opportunities to ‘get their hands dirty’ in the data. Fortunately for them, the data is often engaging and interesting: most of the time it is ordinary people talking about their lives.”

Dr. Wagner adds that for those whose path doesn’t ultimately lie in the field of linguistics, it still allows for insights into the nature of the interaction between language and society.

“It’s no accident that some of the students currently in the lab are simultaneously majoring in other fields in which communication between social groups is critical: political science, education and medicine, for example,” she says. “For graduate students, involvement in sociolinguistic research at an early stage of their graduate careers can shape their whole trajectory.”

Outside of the lab, students in Wagner’s graduate class LIN 871 Sociolinguistics have helped to build a small corpus of recorded interviews with people in the Lansing area. The interviews provide social insights into life on Lansing’s Eastside neighborhood, and an emerging linguistic picture of local speech. The recordings have been used in Wagner’s classes to illustrate local sound change, and for experimental stimuli in a recent undergraduate senior thesis project.