What does “you” do? Examining the correlation between innovative use and pronunciation of the Danish second person singular pronoun

We examine the possible correlation of innovative use of grammatical and phonetic variants by studying the pronunciation of the second person singular pronoun ‘du’ in a corpus of Danish spontaneous speech. To all appearances, the pronoun ‘du’ has taken on a new usage during the past 20-30 years in which the pronoun is used with reference to an undefined person or group of persons in general i.e. as a generic pronoun, instead of the traditional generic pronoun in standard Danish ‘man’. This indicates that the Danish system of personal pronouns is undergoing (re)grammaticalization to some extent, as the second person pronoun is taking over some of the meaning potential of the traditional generic pronoun. To examine whether this meaning change is associated with phonetic change - or whether this locus of innovation on one linguistic level attracts innovative tendencies on the level of pronunciation – the occurrences of ‘du’ in spontaneous speech are categorized both according to their contextually inferred meaning and their pronunciation. We focus on the variation in the pronunciation of the initial phone [d] of the pronoun’s citation form (i.e. [du]) which may be pronounced as a tap, [ɾ], intervocalically between unstressed vowels in spontaneous spoken Danish (cf. Heger (1981)). This phonetic environment is particularly common for the second person singular pronoun. We hypothesize that ‘du’ used with generic reference can never be stressed, whereas ‘du’ with specific reference may be stressed. If unstressed context further conditions the allophony of /d/, the interaction of constraints on usage may lead to a reanalysis by language users in which the tapping of /d/ becomes associated with the generic meaning of ‘du’.

To examine whether such an association may be said to have taken place we analyze the Odder, Næstved and Copenhagen sub-corpora of the LANCHART corpus. We will be able not only to examine whether there is a correlation between these two linguistic levels, but also whether the three sub-communities differ in this regard, such that reanalysis may be restricted to particular groups of speakers.

References: