

Sali A. Tagliamonte



# Variationist Sociolinguistics

Change, Observation,  
Interpretation



# **Contents**

**Acknowledgments**

**Foreword**

**Series Editor's Preface**

**Preface**

**What this Book is About**

**Figures**

**Tables**

**1 Sociolinguistics as Language Variation and Change**

**Sociolinguistics**

**The Linguistic Variable**

**Linguistic Change**

**The Principle of Accountability**

**Circumscribing the Variable Context**

**Evolution of the Linguistic Variable**

**The Importance of Accountability**

**Language Variation and Change and Linguistic Theory**

**Exercises**

**2 Social Patterns**

**Social Class**

**Sex (or Gender)**

**Style and Register**

**Mobility in Space and Mobility in Class**

**Social Network, Communities of Practice**

**Ethnicity and Culture**

**The Mass Media**

**Age**

**Types of Change**

**Principles of Linguistic Change**

**Summary**

**Exercises**

### **3 Linguistic Patterns**

**Sound Change**

**Morphological Change**

**Syntactic Change**

**Semantic Change**

**Grammaticalization**

**Lexical Effects**

**Exemplar Theory**

**Exercises**

### **4 Data and Method**

**The Speech Community**

**Corpus Building**

**Creating Sociolinguistic Corpora**

**The Individual and the Group**

**Constructing an LVC Study**

**Research Ethics**  
**The Gold - Your Data**  
**The Real World**

## **5 Quantitative Analysis**

**The Quantitative Paradigm**  
**Distributional Analysis**  
**Statistical Modeling**  
**The Three Lines of Evidence**  
**The Case Study - Variable (that)**  
**Goldvarb Logistic Regression**  
**Challenging the Variable Rule Program**  
**Drawbacks to the Variable Rule Program**  
**New Toolkits for Variationist**  
**Sociolinguistics**  
**Summary**  
**Exercises**

## **6 Comparative Sociolinguistics**

**Comparison**  
**The Comparative Method**  
**Comparison in Origins**  
**Comparison in Language Contact**  
**Standards for Comparison**  
**Variable (did)**  
**Exercises**

## **7 Phonological Variables**

**Variable (t,d)**

Variable (ing)

Tips for Studying Phonological Variables

Exercises

## **8 Morpho-Syntactic Variables**

Verbal (s)

Adverb (ly)

Modal (have to)

Studying Morpho-Syntactic Variables

Exercises

## **9 Discourse/Pragmatic Features**

Quotative (be like)

General Extenders

Studying the Discourse/Pragmatic Variable

Exercises

## **10 Tense/Aspect Variables**

Grammaticalization and Tense/Aspect Variables

Future (going to)

Perfect (have)

Studying Tense/Aspect Variables

Exercises

## **11 Other Variables**

Variable (come)

Variable (Intensifiers)

Language and the Internet

**Studying Unusual Variables**  
**Exercises**

**12 Sociolinguistic Explanations**

**What Are the Constraints on Change?**

**How Does Language Change?**

**How Is a Change Embedded in Social and Linguistic Systems?**

**Evaluation of a Change**

**Statistical Modeling**

**Traditional Explanations**

**The Principle of Interaction**

**Appendix A Corpora Cited**

**Appendix B Time Periods in the History of English**

**References**

**Subject Index**

**Index of Linguistic Variables**

# Language in Society

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- 38 Talk in Action: Interactions, Identities, and Institutions, *John Heritage and Steven Clayman*
- 39 Principles of Linguistic Change, Volume III: Cognitive and Cultural Factors, *William Labov*
- 40 Variationist Sociolinguistics: Change, Observation, Interpretation, *Sali A. Tagliamonte*

# Variationist Sociolinguistics

CHANGE, OBSERVATION, INTERPRETATION

Sali A. Tagliamonte



A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2012

© 2012 Sali A. Tagliamonte

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate,  
Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Tagliamonte, Sali.

Variationist sociolinguistics : change, observation,  
interpretation / Sali A. Tagliamonte.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-3590-0 (alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-4051-3591-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Language and languages–Variation. 2. Sociolinguistics–Research. I. Title.

P120.V37T348 2012

306.44–dc22

2011010578

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is published in the following electronic formats:

ePDFs 9781444344448; Wiley Online Library  
9781444344479; ePub 9781444344455; mobi:  
9781444344462.

*For  
Anna Blanche Lawson  
1930-2001  
Love you forever Mum,  
Sali*

# ***Acknowledgments***

A person only ever stands somewhere along the ladder of life. I am indebted to many great minds and generous spirits who have helped me in my work. My students, my mentors, my colleagues, my friends, they are often the same people with no clear distinction among them. This is one of the truly gratifying aspects of doing sociolinguistics – you become part of a social network, a practice, a community.

My students have always been my best critics. Let them know that each one of them has helped immeasurably with this book. Derek Denis, Bridget Jankowski, Dylan Uscher, and Cathleen Waters: every question we considered over the past few years has made its way into these pages. My students in LIN1256, Advanced Language Variation and Change, January–April 2011 deserve special mention for their critical input to the prepublication version of the manuscript. Marisa Brook, Julian Brooke, Matthew Gardner, Heidi Haefale, Chris Harvey, Madeline Shellgren, and Jim Smith have shown me, yet again, how much teaching embeds learning.

My past has also woven its way through the chapters, as I have returned to my early research to integrate the present state of the field with its foundations. I am blessed by having been mentored by some of the greatest contributors to the field. Shana Poplack, David Sankoff, Jack Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Jenny Cheshire: this book exists only because I have been able to stand on your shoulders. I am also lucky to have had a knowledgeable and attentive set of critics who scoured the draft manuscript and offered their insights, including four anonymous Wiley-Blackwell reviewers, a savvy team of Wiley editors, my new neighbour Victor Kuperman, my pal Paul Foulkes, and even the General Editor, Peter Trudgill, himself.

No field advances without change. Over the last ten years statistical methods have undergone a veritable renaissance. Chapter 5 evolved over several years of consultation on the state of the art in statistical methods in Variationist Sociolinguistics. I am thankful to Harald Baayen, Daniel Ezra Johnson, and John Paolillo for helping me in my ongoing efforts to model linguistic variation and change in ways that are not only insightful, but also statistically sound.

A sociolinguist is never alone in their research. I am lucky to have had a superb group of lab assistants and project coordinators. The latest, Michael Ritter, has the astonishing ability to manage, organize, interview, transcribe, extract, correct, code, copy, copy-edit, run *Goldvarb*, *R*, and *Ant-Conc*, and everything else I need doing.

I am immensely proud of my own academic progeny who have become my friends; Jen Smith and Alex D'Arcy, where would I be without your ongoing collaborations, savvy insights, and unabashed prodding? My wonderful colleagues Elizabeth Cowper, Elaine Gold, Alana Johns, Keren Rice, and Diane Massam: you have been exuberance, friendship, and community to me since I arrived at UofT in 2001. I have found in your model guidance and sanity. My confidant and best drinking buddy Anthony Warner listens and advises and tells me when I am being silly (this is a more important quality than you might think).

Since my last book, three of my children have become teenagers, the youngest one has started primary school, and I have gained a stepson in the early years of his professional life. This is a great learning ground for a sociolinguist. Dazzian, Freya, Shaman, Tara, and Adrian have taught me much of what I know about age grading, innovation, and incrementation. I am so very thankful to be part of the perpetual state of variation and change, love and commotion we live in. And to Duncan, who is the bedrock of

my life, I am eternally grateful to have found in one man, husband, lover, gardener, and friend.

Finally, I would like to thank my mom. What I have been able to accomplish in my life was fostered in the love and support and many other intangible gifts she gave me.

# ***Foreword***

My grandparents lived in a small town in Southern Ontario. It was a farming hamlet in one of the oldest settled areas of Ontario, Canada, called Maple Station. They owned the general store, gas station, and post office. The store was always filled with locals. When I visited as a child, I would race to the store every time someone came in, trailing behind the adults to eavesdrop on the conversations. In the evenings, my great-aunts and -uncles would visit. Coming from farming stock, the families were huge. My grandfather had eight brothers and sisters and my grandmother had nine. There were people around all the time. They often talked long into the evening, playing Euchre or Crib. I can still hear the lilting cadence of those voices in my mind. This was a world of regularized past participles, double negation, all kinds of variation in vowels and diphthongs, and strange words and expressions. Little did I know of all that then! At the time, I only listened and marveled at how different they sounded.

My mother, who had grown up in that world, became a teacher, a specialist in early childhood education. Yet there were always aspects of her speech that were very different from the Canadian norms in my surroundings. When she talked to my grandparents or my aunts and uncles (her brother and sisters) on the phone, her voice would shift back toward the speech patterns I heard in Maple Station. Sometimes, when telling stories, I would even hear her use the occasional *I says* or *He come*. And when she quoted anyone in her family, her voice always changed.

While I sound just like any other Canadian, there are still parts of my speech that reflect my mother's vernacular, words like "wee" for "small", expressions like "it's a good job" for "it's a good thing". Even today, when my children

make fun of some of the words I use and my pronunciations (“tiger” [tægr], “Saturday” [sɛrde:], “southern” [sʌwðɔrn]) I blame my old-line Southern Ontario roots.

These are the realities of language variation and change. Our life histories are a study of continuities and changes, of ancestry and origins, of time and space, of uncommon similarities across time and remarkable differences across generation gaps. Our heritage follows us wherever we go and throughout our lives. For me, the world came alive when I discovered sociolinguistics because it made my experience make sense. The linguistic difference and variety around me had regularity and meaning, system and explanation. May this book make sociolinguistics – and the world of variation around you – more comprehensible to you.

*Sali A. Tagliamonte*  
*Toronto, Ontario*

## ***Series Editor's Preface***

It is not often that one looks at a book and says “this is *it*.” That, however, is precisely what I found myself thinking when I first received the text of Sali Tagliamonte’s *Sociolinguistics: Variation, Change and Interpretation*. This *really is it* – this is the book that linguistic variation theory has been waiting for. It has not, however, been waiting too long. Now is exactly the right time for this book to appear; and, I like to think, the Blackwell’s *Language in Society* series is exactly the right place for it to appear. The study of “Language Variation and Change” (LVC) has been with us now, as Professor Tagliamonte says, for about 40 years. My own first encounter with the field, at that time still without a name, was at what I believe to be the first ever academic meeting devoted to the topic, the Colloquium on New Ways of Analysing Variation in English held at Georgetown University in the USA in October 1972. This turned out to be the first of a series of annual NWAV conferences which continue to be held to this day – though without the word “English” in the title now – and indeed at the time of this writing, the next meeting is going to be the fortieth. I don’t know what Sali was doing in October 1972, but she was certainly not nearly old enough to be at the meeting. In spite of her comparative youth, however, we are very grateful that it has fallen to her to produce in this book a distillation of all the advances that have been made and all the wisdom that has accrued in our now mature field over the last four decades. She is perhaps uniquely qualified – in terms of her erudition, her field-work experience, her analytical innovations, and the large amounts of data and the wide range of language varieties she has worked on – to write the first book which is truly an introduction to LVC, a summary of its main goals and achievements, and a

springboard for future progress. She has done this, moreover, in a masterly fashion: not only will the reader of this volume learn how work in LVC is done, they will also learn why we do it, and what the benefits are. All languages are variable – variability is an essential component of human language. But it is only in the last 40 years that we have fully understood the degree to which this is so, have investigated the patterning in which variation is involved, and have developed the concepts and techniques for dealing with it – developments which Sali herself has played a very major role in advancing. As this book shows, any linguistic work which attempts to shed light on the nature of the human language faculty and on the nature of linguistic change, without taking account of language's inherent variability, will inevitably fall short.

Peter Trudgill

# ***Preface***

## **What this Book is About**

This is a book about the fascinating, intricate and remarkable relationship between language and society, a field that is typically called sociolinguistics. However, this is not a book about everything in sociolinguistics because sociolinguistics is a very diverse and wide-ranging discipline. Taken broadly, sociolinguistics involves studying the interaction of language, culture, and society. This book cannot do all that. Instead, I focus on the type of sociolinguistics that has come to be known as Variationist Sociolinguistics, or “Language Variation and Change” (LVC). This is the type of sociolinguistics I have been practicing in my own research since 1981. This branch of the sociolinguistics tree is known for its focus on language change as well as its quantitative methods and its concern for accountable methodology. It is the study of linguistic variation and change through observation and interpretation.

Variationist Sociolinguistics deals with systematic and inherent variation in language, both in the present (synchrony) and in the past (diachrony). The goal of LVC studies is to understand the mechanisms which link extra linguistic phenomena (the social and cultural) with patterned linguistic heterogeneity (the internal, variable, system of language) (Sankoff 1988a: 157).

Here is the definition from the leading journal, aptly entitled *Language Variation and Change*:

*Language Variation and Change* is the only journal dedicated exclusively to the study of linguistic variation and the capacity to deal with systematic and inherent

variation in synchronic and diachronic linguistics. Sociolinguistics involves analysing the interaction of language, culture and society; the more specific study of variation is concerned with the impact of this interaction on the structures and processes of traditional linguistics. *Language Variation and Change* concentrates on the details of linguistic structure in actual speech production and processing (or writing), including contemporary or historical sources.

This book is written in this spirit, taking the details of variable linguistic structures of language in use and demonstrating how quantitative analysis can tell us something interesting about what we find, i.e. how variation patterns, why it exists, what explains it.

However, this textbook cannot even cover everything within the quantitative sociolinguistic enterprise. A number of subdisciplines have developed which involve specialized methodological and data-specific practices. Some of these require very specific knowledge that extends beyond what can be covered in a single book. Therefore, I will confine myself to the area of sociolinguistics upon whose foundations these approaches to variation rest and with which I am most familiar. In so doing, I will leave to other experts certain subdisciplines in the field, including sociophonetics with its detailed methods of acoustic measurement and experimentation, discourse analysis with its elaborate qualitative component, aspects of historical linguistics which include variationist techniques, corpus linguistics, and the broad field of sociocultural linguistics. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate that variationist sociolinguistic principles and practices, the identification and study of patterns, and all the aspects of the methodology laid out here can be applied in virtually any study of language.

You will find me discussing the same old variable (ing) again. One of my students asked me once in exasperation: *Why do we have to keep talking about variable (ing)?* Why? It provides a familiar model and a good example of how to approach variation, interpret it, and understand it. Besides, there may be some things about variable (ing) we have not discovered yet. I will be sure to find some new variables to talk about too. To support creative thinking I have sprinkled “notes,” “tips,” and “mini quizzes” throughout the text. Tips provide advice for what the student might encounter in her own research and how to get around it. Notes are elaborations, often my own inner thoughts about research mentioned within the text. Mini quizzes embed learning by questioning the reader on some key point under discussion. I believe that teaching can best be accomplished by “doing.” My approach will be to use the findings and observations arising from a series of case studies of “the linguistic variable,” the key construct of the discipline, to demonstrate how Variationist Sociolinguistic theory is put into practice. I will embed these studies in the general research trends in the field over the past 40 years. The underlying goal is to show you the links between language and society as they arise from observation and interpretation of variable phenomena.

The book takes as a foundation the major findings of sociolinguistics as put forward in broad-based introductory level textbooks (Wardough 2002), with a focus on “Variationist Sociolinguistics” in particular, as synthesized in Chambers (2003). I define “classic” research in sociolinguistics as that conducted by William Labov, Peter Trudgill, Walt Wolfram, Ralph Fasold, and Lesley Milroy. This early research exposed persistent, regular sociolinguistic patterns that have given rise to “sociolinguistic principles.” This will be my departure point.

The discoveries of this early body of knowledge is already consolidated in the leading introductory sociolinguistic textbooks in the field. Each chapter ends with a reading list of the major sources I have drawn from. My goal for this book is to put the cumulative findings of the last 30–40 years into context with this foundational work. The findings I will report are meant to broaden and enrich classic sociolinguistic research by bringing the latest evidence to bear on fundamental sociolinguistic observations. Therefore I will focus more on developments to sociolinguistics as put forward in Labov's most recent research as synthesized in his important *Principles of Linguistic Change* volumes (Labov 1994, 2001a, 2010). This work will be brought to the forefront, in the context of, and with reference to, other major research advances in the field, particularly those arising from the journal *Language Variation and Change*. Then, to make practical exactly how this research is done, I will turn to a series of choice linguistic variables. This research encompasses analyses of multiple levels of grammar – phonology, morpho-syntax-semantics, and discourse-pragmatics. Each case study presents findings and observations about how different types of variants are used and how they pattern at the community level and within the systems of grammar of which they are a part. Each case study interprets the findings within the context of sociolinguistic inquiry as I have defined it above.

The textbook is organized as follows. Chapter 1 introduces “sociolinguistic variation theory” (Sankoff 1988a: 140) as Language Variation and Change (LVC). Chapters 2 and 3 synthesize the observations and findings of LVC research that have led to sociolinguistic principles and sociolinguistic theory. These chapters present a synthesis of the pervasive “patterns” both sociolinguistic and linguistic, as, for example, elucidated in Chambers (2003) or Trudgill (2000), from which LVC has developed. Chapter 4 considers issues

relating to data collection, field work, and the key methodological issues of how to deal with the effect of individuals and lexical items. Chapter 5 summarizes the state of the art in quantitative methods and statistical practice. Chapter 6 outlines the comparative sociolinguistic approach. Chapters 7–11 present case studies of linguistic variables from phonology to discourse. Each chapter introduces the variable(s), issues arising from studying them, solutions, and findings. Observations are evaluated both from the perspective of sociolinguistic principles as well as in the context of the prevailing knowledge of the variables in the field. Chapter 12 synthesizes the observations so as to provide explanations for both internal and external patterns of language variation and puts them into the perspective of their social and historical context.

## Mini Quiz

Q1 Variation Sociolinguistics is the study of systematic and inherent variation in language, past and present.

- (a) True
- (b) False

*Answer = TRUE*

# ***Figures***

- [1.1](#) Rates of *avoir* and *être* usage with “tomber” per thousand lines of transcription
- [2.1](#) Idealized pattern for sharp stratification by social class
- [2.2](#) Idealized pattern for gradient stratification by social class
- [2.3](#) Idealized pattern for stratification by social class and style – indicator
- [2.4](#) Idealized pattern for stratification by social class and style – marker
- [2.5](#) Curvilinear pattern for social class when change originates from the middle class
- [2.6](#) Idealized pattern of stratification by sex and social class
- [2.7](#) Idealized pattern of female-led linguistic change
- [2.8](#) Frequency of phonological and grammatical variables
- [2.9](#) S-curve of linguistic change
- [2.10](#) An idealized pattern of linguistic change in progress (generational change)
- [2.11](#) Overall distribution of quotatives by age in Toronto English, c. 2002–2004
- [2.12](#) An idealized pattern of age-graded change
- [2.13](#) An idealized pattern of the adolescent peak
- [2.14](#) Ch-lenition in Panama c. 1969 and 1982–84
- [2.15](#) Pattern of a feature increasing in use over 60 years in real time for Jane Doe and apparent time for the speech community
- [2.16](#) An idealized pattern of a stable linguistic variable
- [2.17](#) An idealized pattern of linguistic change from across the branches of the family tree, i.e. from outside the community
- [2.18](#) Distribution of variable (h), York English, c. 1997
- [2.19](#) Distribution of variable (that), Toronto, c. 2003–2004
- [2.20](#) Distribution of [f], [t], and Ø variants as opposed to [θ]
- [2.21](#) Distribution of non-RP variants for three linguistic variables in Norwich English, c. 1972
- [3.1](#) Idealized pattern for sound change via weakening
- [3.2](#) Idealized pattern for morphological change via analogical extension – leveling

- [3.3](#) Idealized change in progress that exhibits the Constant Rate Effect
- [3.4](#) Idealized functional effect
- [3.5](#) Idealized pattern of a grammaticalizing feature according to a relevant linguistic context
- [3.6](#) Three variants in apparent time in Texas, USA, c. 1980s
- [3.7](#) Frequency of *have got* for possession by nature of the complement in real time
- [3.8](#) Frequency of *have to* for deontic modality by verb type in apparent time in York English
- [4.1](#) Distribution of intensifiers by speaker sex, Toronto, c. 2003–2004
- [4.2](#) Distribution of intensifiers by individual males in Toronto, c. 2003–2004
- [4.3](#) Distribution of intensifiers by individual females in Toronto, c. 2003–2004
- [4.4](#) Distribution of zero copula in real time by year and month – Shaman
- [5.1](#) *R*, random forest, linguistic, and social factors, all verbs
- [5.2](#) *R*, conditional inference tree, social factors
- [7.1](#) Constraint ranking of morphological categories on variable (t,d)
- [7.2](#) Overall distribution of simplified clusters of variable (t,d) in York, UK (c. 1997) and Toronto, Canada (c. 2003–2004)
- [7.3](#) Distribution of simplified clusters for variable (t,d) by gender and age in Toronto, Canada 184
- [7.4](#) Distribution of simplified clusters for variable (t,d) by gender and age in York, UK
- [7.5](#) Distribution of simplified clusters for variable (t,d) by education in Toronto, Canada
- [7.6](#) Distribution of simplified clusters for variable (t,d) by education in York, UK
- [7.7](#) Comparison of frequency of simplified clusters by grammatical category across communities
- [7.8](#) Overall distribution of alveolar variants of variable (ing) in York, UK (c. 1997) and Toronto, Canada (c. 2003–2004)
- [7.9](#) Distribution of alveolar variants for variable (ing) by gender and age in Toronto, Canada
- [7.10](#) Distribution of alveolar variants for variable (ing) by gender and age in York, UK
- [7.11](#) Distribution of alveolar variants for variable (t,d) by education in Toronto, Canada

- [7.12](#) Distribution of alveolar variants for variable (ing) by education in York, UK
- [7.13](#) Comparison of frequency of alveolar variants of variable (ing) by grammatical category across communities
- [7.14](#) Pattern of alveolar variants of variable (ing) among nouns compared with indefinite pronouns in York and Toronto
- [7.15](#) Distribution of simplified clusters for *just* and all other contexts by following phonological segment
- [7.16](#) Distribution of simplified clusters in apparent time in Toronto English
- [8.1](#) Constraint ranking for verbal -s in pronouns vs. NP contexts
- [8.2](#) Distribution of variable (s) by grammatical person, Devon and Samaná
- [8.3](#) Inter-variety comparison of the type of subject constraint
- [8.4](#) Inter-variety comparison of the subject type constraint, including northern Englishes
- [8.5](#) Overall distribution of -Ø adverbs in the history of English
- [8.6](#) Distribution of zero adverbs in York English by age
- [8.7](#) Distribution of zero adverbs in York English by age, sex, and education 225
- [8.8](#) Distribution of zero variants by adverb semantics and age in York English
- [8.9](#) Overall distribution of deontic modal forms across dialects
- [8.10](#) Distribution forms for deontic modality in contexts of subjective obligation by generation in York
- [8.11](#) Distribution of deontic *have to* in Toronto, Canada and York, UK in apparent time
- [8.12](#) Factor weights for the probability of deontic *have to* by type of modality across varieties, York, Buckie, Wheatley Hill, and Toronto
- [9.1](#) Distribution of quotatives in Canadian English, c. 1995 and c. 2002–2003
- [9.2](#) Overall distribution of quotatives across the generations in Toronto English
- [9.3](#) Cross-study comparison of GE frequency per 10 000 words
- [9.4](#) Test of decategorization of *and things like that*
- [9.5](#) Distribution of GE types in apparent time
- [9.6](#) Comparison of token count and proportion count for *like*
- [9.7](#) Distribution of quotative *like* in real time (Clara) and in apparent time (all 9–19 year olds in Toronto)

- [10.1](#) Pathway for grammaticization of *going to*
- [10.2](#) Distribution of the major future variants in each of the communities
- [10.3](#) Distribution of future variants in York, UK, c. 1997 by generation
- [10.4](#) Hierarchy of constraints for semantic function across varieties
- [11.1](#) Use of past reference *come*
- [11.2](#) Distribution of past reference *come* by age and sex
- [11.3](#) Distribution of major intensifiers in York in apparent time
- [11.4](#) Distribution of intensifier *so* by sex in *Friends*
- [11.5](#) Distribution of major intensifiers in Toronto in apparent time
- [11.6](#) Distribution of *so* and *pretty* by sex of the speaker in apparent time, Toronto
- [11.7](#) Delexicalization process
- [11.8](#) Distribution of *so* by adjective type across generations in Toronto
- [11.9](#) Distribution of *so* by emotional value of the adjective
- [11.10](#) Distribution of laughter variants among adolescents in IM, c. 2004–2006