

The diffusion of lexical bundles from an urban center to a rural community in Japan

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Lexical bundles are frequently-occurring sequences of words such as ‘don’t you think that’ (Biber et al., 2004). In spite of much research, we know little about speaker-level variation in lexical bundles. In this research, I demonstrate that lexical bundles spread through diffusion. Diffusion is the spreading of a linguistic feature among adults as well as from adults to children (Labov, 2007).

I examine the dissemination of seven lexical bundles from the large urban center of Osaka, Japan to a rural farming community approximately 60 kilometers away. I use the Corpus of Kansai Vernacular Japanese, a collection of 152 hour-long sociolinguistic interviews, of which 32 are from the rural community. The interviewees range in age from 15 years old to 79 years old. I investigated age-based differences in the rate of usage of the following bundles:

1. ~ka-na-tte-omot-te ‘I think that it might be~’
2. ~tte-iware-te ‘It was said to me that~’
3. ~to-omot-te-ru ‘I am thinking that~’
4. ~na~akan+nen ‘~must~’
5. ~naa-tte-omot-te ‘I think that~, right?’
6. ~nan-te-yuu ‘What do you say?’
7. ~VOLITIONAL MARKER u-to-omot-te ‘I am thinking that I will~’

All of these bundles show a monotonic increase in usage rate with decreasing speaker age, and thus are characteristic of youth speech. However, there is an important urban-rural difference. In the case of the urban speakers, the youngest age cohort (N=23; age 15 to 18 years old) use these expressions the most (as expected). However, in the case of the rural speakers, the group that uses the expressions the most is the second-youngest age cohort (N=9, age 19 to 22 years). This group contains several college students studying in the Osaka area, giving them face-to-face contact with their urban counterparts. I conclude that these older students have acquired the urban lexical bundle usage patterns through diffusion.