The velar nasal in Japanese revisited

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The objective of variationist sociolinguistics, over the past fifty years, has been to examine the social environment in which language is employed and the linguistic internal factors affecting variation and change. I will illustrate how these external and internal processes interact with each other, focusing on one variable in Japanese: the velar nasal.

Earlier research and observation have demonstrated that this variable has undergone a process of change. The results of a complete reanalysis of my 1986 fieldwork data obtained from speakers born in Tokyo between 1903 and 1972 illustrate the role played by three internal factors, two phonological and one morphological, as well as two social factors in constraining the variation.

Data extracted from Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese (CSJ), a large-scale annotated corpus of spontaneous Japanese, complement my corpus with a cohort of speakers who were born between 1965 and 1979. Only one of the above phonological factors endures to this younger generation of speakers, who have almost near categorically lost the velar nasal. This confirms the existence of inherent variation and systematic heterogeneity elaborated within the variationist framework.