

Model answers: a rejoinder to the responses to the mediated innovation model

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Published version

SAYERS, Dave (2014). Model answers: a rejoinder to the responses to the mediated innovation model. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 18 (2), 272-276.

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Model answers: A rejoinder to the responses to the Mediated Innovation Model

Dave Sayers

As a long time listener, first time caller to the Journal of Sociolinguistics, I was surprised and delighted that my contribution should grow into a discussion forum with such a distinguished line-up. The invited responses have judiciously highlighted important snags and wrinkles in my argument; but still, happily most of them express an underlying harmony with the basic tenets. This is a constructive and positive place to be, not just for me but for sociolinguistics overall if we are to progress in mapping out this new research landscape.

In all, this feels like a robust discussion of a contentious area of research, and I am pleased with how constructive it is. As the various responses forbearingly point out, I have inevitably overlooked some relevant research, particularly Tagliamonte's recent work on social media and Stuart-Smith's latest article, which both authors helpfully summarise in their responses – a highly instructive extension to the discussion. Hopefully from here we can progress towards a rigorous interrogation of the role of mass media (and niche media, and social media, and so on) in language change.

In the remainder of this short rejoinder, I offer a few brief remarks in relation to each of the invited responses, aiming to continue the spirit of constructive dialogue and clarification.

Trudgill

To begin at the sharp end, if anyone were feeling convinced about the role of the media, Peter Trudgill provides a characteristically refreshing glass of water in the face. This may seem an unusual reaction but it is a genuine pleasure to see Trudgill in full stride, guns blazing, having none of it. I think his contribution is indispensable in holding our feet to the fire, nudging (shoving?) us to provide clearer evidence and never to rush to judgment.

I hope Trudgill continues to engage with this topic in a penetratingly critical manner. In particular, I hope he refines his scepticism and engages more closely with the empirical details. He cautions: "We would be ill-advised to suppose that the vocalisation of /l/ in Australia ... results from diffusion from London; and I see no reason not to apply the same degree of caution to Glasgow." It may be a little unfair to infer that the research in this field has "supposed" any given factor. What comes across in Stuart-Smith and her team's Glasgow project, and in Tagliamonte's recent work, is a painstaking refusal to suppose anything, instead meticulously interrogating which factors provide evidence of influence, and to what degree. If Trudgill could bring his eminent expertise to bear on those new forms of data, then some truly productive insights could emerge.

Later, he asserts: "Repeated exposure does indeed come from the media. But one does not interact verbally with the TV. ... To repeat Labov's point, diffusion is purely a matter of who interacts most often with who." Again this doesn't really do justice to the interdisciplinary contribution of media audience research – usefully summarised in Gunter's response – and the way media engagement can constitute parasocial interaction. True, this may not involve volubly chatting to one's TV set, but it appears to have some of the cognitive features (and effects) of interpersonal interaction, in some instances. Backed up by targeted surveys, questionnaires and ethnographic methods, followed by statistical analyses of interrelating factors, there does seem to be better evidence available than Trudgill's response would suggest. It will greatly benefit the ongoing debate if critical voices like his can zoom in and really scrutinise the details.

Tagliamonte

I found Tagliamonte's summary of her recent research into the influence of internet shorthand on spoken language to be an illuminating extension of the debate on broadcast media. As she notes, any headline focus on mass media may be somewhat behind the times, and she points out the dramatic changes that have occurred since around 2004 in terms of internet usage. This timing is perhaps the nub of the issue: in my article I reviewed publications up until 2013, but the actual data collection in Approach 5 – which showed greatest methodological interrogation of mass media – ended in 2004. A

whole slew of new ways to interact and engage with linguistic innovations has sprung up since then, fuelled by emergent technologies. For my part I think television is still worth investigating, but it will be essential to combine this with an ever-expanding set of other factors, exactly as Tagliamonte urges. The mediated innovation model is designed to be overlain in time with these additional factors, and hopefully our discussion here will provide a spur to explore more diverse methodologies and datasets.

Kristiansen

Kristiansen asks: “Does the claim say that what happens in media influence is qualitatively different from the influence which happens in face-to-face interaction? That would be a very interesting claim, indeed, and a claim which one would expect to be explicated in the model.” That was certainly my intended claim, although if one hoped for explication in the mediated innovation model itself, one would probably be disappointed. I think this was explicated more by the findings of the Glasgow study in Approach 5. In drawing up an epistemological model, my intention has been to map out a framework for future research to explore these various influences.

Kristiansen questions the use of ‘epistemological model’ for the mediated innovation model, preferring ‘research model’ – in order to focus more on the conceptualisation and operationalisation of ‘media influence in language change’. I had intended ‘epistemological model’ to mean something along the lines of ‘a model of what we can know’ about this subject, but his suggestion of ‘research model’, emphasising concepts and methods, seems perfectly well reasoned.

Kristiansen goes on to review the possible effects of Danish national media on language use in Denmark. This seems an exciting terrain for developing empirical measures of media influence. I sincerely hope that his future work on variation in Denmark helps to address the blind spots highlighted in the mediated innovation model and in the research field on which it is based – particularly a “preoccupation with Anglophone societies” and shortfall at “the level of language varieties”. Whilst presenting the ideas behind my article in various places over the last seven years, I have had engaging discussions about possible applications around Europe and beyond – not least Arabophone countries. My overtures to future researchers therefore very much include those in non-Anglophone societies. I look forward to seeing the results of Kristiansen’s work in this area.

Androutsopoulos

After expediently highlighting some important terminological and conceptual quandaries, Androutsopoulos suggests that the mediated innovation model “moves towards, but does not quite achieve a turning point in theorizing the complex and multi-layered impact of media ... on sociolinguistic developments in contemporary societies”. If the mediated innovation model acts as a brick on the road towards a fuller understanding of these multifarious influences, then all this has been time well spent.

Androutsopoulos goes on to urge extension of our collective focus to other languages; and, recalling Kristiansen’s response, I agree this extension is an essential next step. He later argues – echoing Tagliamonte’s response – that progress is also vitally needed to understand the influence of “participatory networked communication” online. It is extremely constructive to have these concerns highlighted, and solutions proposed. Progress on these matters depends on it.

Stuart-Smith

Stuart-Smith provides a useful elaboration on the meaning of media ‘influence’, and – in tandem with Gunter’s response – important scrutiny about the terms of debate. In raising concerns about the nature of the mediated innovation model, she illustrates the risks run by representing complex social processes with a small diagram. “Sayers’ model should probably be expanded to admit more factors, including social practices and explicit acknowledgement of the possibility of dialect contact.” I had hoped that the model did admit those, both in the text and in the way the diagram uses a dotted backdrop to represent social networks permeating within and between distant speech communities. In this I intended to emphasise the overlapping influence of media and dialect contact, even between apparently remote locations. If I gave an “implicit notion of media as a sole causal factor”, then I

articulated things rather unclearly. But if there was any ambiguity, then her clarification is welcome. If nothing else, she rightly redoubles the warning about being rashly deterministic in considering media influence. She also aptly summarises the mediated innovation model as “a small section of a larger sociolinguistic model”, ready to be overlain by a wide range of other influences.

Stuart-Smith shrewdly scrutinises the semantics of a term like ‘broadcast’, which could invoke a sense of distant directive control of inert recipients, swaying like docile reeds in the breeze. One of my greatest fears about the mediated innovation model, and the diagram especially, is ‘broadcast’ being seen as a one-way beaming of linguistic innovations into viewers’ minds and mouths. I fully endorse Stuart-Smith’s cautions about the complex web of causal pathways, amongst which media can only play a part. I am reminded of the etymology of the word ‘broadcast’, which began life in the early nineteenth century as a compound word meaning to scatter seeds widely. That feels like a good analogy for the partial role of mass media: scattering seeds which might grow in their new location, but reliant on local conditions on the ground, developing differently in each place, and always dependent on human movement. By this flowery metaphor I mean to echo Stuart-Smith’s assertion that sociolinguists must “take care not to lose sight of the importance of the local sociolinguistic context, and especially linguistic detail and social meaning, if they wish also to consider mechanisms of media influence”.

Gunter

Gunter beckons us powerfully towards genuine interdisciplinary dialogue, crossing big divides in academia for mutual enrichment. This is great to see. That invitation for interdisciplinary, multi-methodological analysis, involving diverse datasets and analytical techniques, was really the most fundamental purpose of my article. And the motivation for that – in line with Gunter – is not to back up predetermined notions of media influence, but to propose better ways of interrogating that possibility.

It is heartening that Gunter has been invited into this discussion, and that he is already a part of this interdisciplinary endeavour (having worked in Jane Stuart-Smith’s team). Particularly important is his encouragement of “carefully designed surveys of media audiences or intervention studies in which behavioural responses are measured in relation to specific types of media exposure”. I was once cautioned as an undergraduate that if you search hard enough for a pattern then you will probably find it, or convince yourself that you have. Gunter’s methodological insights urge not only incisive interdisciplinarity, but also caution and rigour: controlling for extraneous influences, pinning down what role the media might have, and staying comfortable with the idea that there may be no role at all. Likewise I have hoped to advocate treading a path carefully between open dismissal and hasty embrace of media influence, instead mobilising diverse methods to get to grips with the matter, systematically, intricately, and agnostically.

Gunter’s extensive review of media audience research, and proposals for future interdisciplinary work, show just how far we have to go. This is even before we grapple with the influence of media forms rapidly superseding broadcast media – as urged by Tagliamonte in her response. I hope Gunter’s input continues, and I hope sociolinguists continue to reach out across disciplines, to enrich understanding of these overlapping causal pathways on language change.

As a summative thought, recalling the interdisciplinary overtures from Stuart-Smith and Gunter, and the innovative approaches suggested by Kristiansen and Tagliamonte, I couldn’t agree more with Androutsopoulos when he asserts: “Integrating insights from a range of research fields is in my view indispensable in order to develop a broader research programme on sociolinguistic change in mediatized societies.” This collaborative clarion call feels suitable as both an end to our current discussion and a foreword to this nascent area of research. We are in exciting times in sociolinguistics, perched on the precipice of a very new way of understanding the relationship between language and society. Stay tuned.