Not always variable: Probing the vernacular grammar
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Written and spoken language exhibit marked differences in linguistic form and patterning (Biber 1988; 1995; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan 1999). Standard written language is considered to be uniform and governed by prescription, whereas the vernacular, ‘real language in use’ (Milroy 1992), is characterized as inherently variable and the most revealing of structured heterogeneity (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968). In this presentation, I discuss on four English morphosyntactic features that call into question standard assumptions about the nature of vernacular language: (i) the genitive, (ii) the comparative, (iii) the dative, and (iv) relative pronouns. Once subjected to scrutiny using variationist methodology (e.g. Tagliamonte 2012), the nature of each feature is found to be characterized by functional divides in casual speech that reflect discrete configurations of variant use. The vernacular is (mostly) segregated by one variant or another, offering a new angle of understanding for a group of grammatical phenomena that have been considered functional equivalents. After introducing each variable and detailing its patterning in speech, I expose a characteristic arguably shared by each: the diachronic trajectory of each feature into the English language, in which analogy and prestige were powerful motivations for variant choice. I suggest that this combination of systemic and social factors contributed to the nature of these variables in the vernacular grammar. Further, I will advocate for greater scrutiny of written and spoken data and the outcomes of change from above and below (Labov 1972) within each register. The type of innovation and its historical trajectory critically influences the nature of the emergent variable grammar.

References: