

Priming and (Non-)Obsolescence in Morphosyntactic Variation

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Why won't old morphosyntactic variants die? Though this question is one that is not often asked by variationists, in any study of linguistic change in progress there is always one variant that is losing ground as the newer one becomes more frequent and less contextually-restricted. In this talk I will show that a large part of the answer to this question can be found in priming or persistence effects: in any case of variation where there is one variant that is demonstrably older than the other and/or obsolescing, the priming effects on this older variant will be significantly stronger than those on the younger variant. Thus the survival of the obsolescing variant crucially depends on these priming effects. More generally, it can be shown that the productivity of the obsolescing variant is dependent on both paradigmatic and syntagmatic factors. I will present data from a number of different cases of morphosyntactic variation in Spanish and Portuguese that support this theory.