The role of geography in syntactic variation: A corpus-based analysis on adverb position across varieties of English worldwide

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OVERVIEW

Does adverb placement exhibit geographical patterning in varieties of English around the world?

- Tobler’s (1970) first law of geography: “everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things”.
- Certain adverbs can be placed in multiple positions within a sentence without changing its meaning.
- This study employs spatial statistical techniques to determine if there is regional patterning of adverb position in varieties of English worldwide.
- It is found that frequency and pure manner adverbs exhibit strong geographical patterning in terms of their placement.

METHOD

- Ten English varieties from the International Corpus of English: Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Kenya, Tanzania, Jamaica, Hong Kong, India, Philippines, Singapore, and Canada.
- Four adverb classes: Evaluative (e.g., unfortunately), Frequency (e.g., recently), Pure Manner (e.g., loudly), and Modal (e.g., probably).
- Three adverb positions: Sentence-Initial, Pre-Verbal, and Post-Verbal.
- Euclidean syntactic distances were calculated for each pair of locations, and modeled using a Mantel test vs. geographical distances, and vs. Trudgill’s (1974) notion of linguistic gravity.
- Spatial autocorrelation techniques, global Moran’s I (Moran 1948) and local Getis-Ord Gi* (Ord and Getis 1995), were used to identify which variable(s) exhibit global spatial clustering, and which location(s) exhibit clustering of high/low values.

RESULTS (SPOKEN DATA)

- Figure 1: Distribution of adverbs in sentence-initial position across all English varieties.
- Figure 2: Distribution of adverbs in pre-verbal position across all English varieties.
- Figure 3: Distribution of adverbs in post-verbal position across all English varieties.

- Figure 4: Euclidean syntactic distances of frequency adverbs correlated with geographical distances. Geographical distance explains 24.0% of the variance at p < 0.03.
- Figure 5: Euclidean syntactic distances of manner adverbs correlated with Trudgill’s Linguistic Gravity Indices (TLGI). TLGI explains 11.6% of the variance at p < 0.03.
- Figure 6: Euclidean syntactic distances of modal adverbs correlated with Trudgill’s Linguistic Gravity Indices (TLGI). TLGI explains 30.5% of the variance at p < 0.04.

DISCUSSION

- No geographical patterning was found in the written data.
- Contact languages may be the driving force behind variation in adverb placement.
- In most of these nations, virtually all people speak a language other than English as a first language.
- If a language is learned as a second language, then it would correlate with greater differences in adverb placement among these English varieties, but in adverb placement in the contact languages.

SELECTED REFERENCES


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