Beyond the evils of social media: Weak-tie hypothesis in digital networks

Mikko Laitinen (University of Eastern Finland)

The talk will be in English, and the slides will be available in both Finnish and English for audience's convenience.

Public discourse on social media often highlights the negative aspects of various platforms, and sometimes rightly so, given the substantial harm big tech companies and their applications can cause. For researchers, however, large-scale and information-rich data available on social media can be a treasure trove. This talk introduces the work of two externally funded research projects: one developing infrastructures that enable large-scale use of social media data in linguistics, and another developing methods for variationist sociolinguistic research based on such data.

I will begin by introducing the data collected in the infrastructure project and then present our work on the weak-tie hypothesis in sociolinguistics. This theoretical model, pioneered by the Milroys in the 1970s and 1980s, has been influential in explaining how linguistic innovations emerge and spread between communities. Yet the construct of weak ties has primarily been tested using small datasets from close-knit communities, and the ethnographic methods traditionally employed are best suited to networks of 30–50 individuals, and they often fail to capture highly mobile individuals (Milroy & Milroy 1992). Our projects draw on social anthropology and complex systems research, which suggest that human networks are far larger, and our methods allow researchers to explore the emergence and spread of linguistic innovations at scale and from a range of settings.

The second part of this talk presents findings from an ongoing case study that explores how recent lexical innovations in English spread through social networks in 2020-2022. Prior research has shown that new lexical items often emerge in urban areas, but researchers lack detailed knowledge of the socio-cultural contexts in which lexical innovations occur (Grieve et al. 2018). This talk demonstrates how information about social networks can help address this gap. The results encompass both macro-level patterns and a micro-level analysis of a single lexical item: rizz (meaning style, charisma, or attractiveness), selected as the Oxford University Press Word of the Year in 2023. It first appears in the Oxford Monitor Corpus in 2022, making it an ideal candidate for investigation in our early-2020s dataset.

This talk offers insights for anyone interested in how digital infrastructures can support sociolinguistic research, as well as scholars of linguistic change. Large-scale, socially structured data from social media holds significant theoretical potential: while the actuation of linguistic change is widely understood to be functional, its diffusion requires knowledge of social settings, precisely the kind of information that social media networks can provide.

References

Grieve, Jack, Andrea Nini & Diansheng Guo. 2018. Mapping lexical innovation on American social media. Journal of English Linguistics, 46:4, 293–319. DOI: 10.1177/0075424218793191.

Milroy, Lesley & James Milroy. 1992. Social network and social class: Toward an integrated sociolinguistic model. Language in Society 21, 1–26.