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“Dragon fly”: Lexical change, local scatter, and the national norm

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ABSTRACT

In the New York area, there are three local terms for “dragon fly”: *darning needle*, *dining needle*, and *diamond needle*. We analyze the distribution of these terms and their relation to the national norm, *dragon fly*. (Language variation, dialectology, language change.)

Kurath and McDavid (1961) assert that the local term for a *dragon fly* in the New York City area and much of the northeast is *darning needle*. For some time we attempted to impress introductory linguistics classes with this fact only to find that many of the members of these classes said *dining needle* instead. Worse, when we pointed out to them that they were mistaken in their usage, they not only refused to correct their usage but often insisted that they had never heard the term *darning needle*. We were somewhat mollified by the existence of a second group who did admit to using *darning needle*, but chaos again took the lead as we became aware of a third group who said *diamond needle*. Mix these three groups with a fourth who profess to know no term but *dragon fly* and add the knowledge that they all grew up in the same area and are predominantly the same age and a resolve grows to take all future dialect examples from the Rhenisch Fan. However, we did formulate a working hypothesis that since the area is an r-less one and *darning needle* is obsolete as a term for a *sewing needle*, children hearing *darning needle* uttered might perceive it as *dining needle*, where *dining* as opposed to *darning* would have the virtue of being an item in their vocabulary even if the combination didn't make much sense. Children who then perceived *dining* as *diamond* had the further advantages of hearing a real lexical item that not only already existed in their lexicon but also made sense. When we noticed a sign on the Northern State Parkway on Long Island warning “No Guide Rail,” it became obvious that we had to investigate this phenomenon before one of us became known as Mike Aronoff.

The subjects were over two hundred undergraduates at the State University of New York at Stony Brook enrolled in either Introduction to Linguistics or Marriage and the Family. A preponderance of them had grown up either in New York City or Long Island. Those who had not grown up in the area were eliminated from consideration. Subjects were asked their age, sex, and where they grew up on a questionnaire festooned with pictures of dragon flies. They were asked if

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they knew any name other than *dragon fly* for the pictured insect, if they knew any further terms, which terms they used most frequently, which they thought children used, and what they called the rail at the side of a highway.

The first results are negative. Tables 1–3 show that neither age, nor sex, nor area significantly affects the choice among *darning needle*, *dining needle*, and *diamond needle*. Although Table 2 shows some apparent tendency away from *diamond needle* for the over-thirties, the discrepancy is not statistically significant.

Table 4 is more encouraging. It shows that people who mention *darning needle* first are most likely to know one of the other two terms, while people who mention *diamond needle* first are least likely to know one of the other two terms. This supports our hypothesis that there is a move from *darning* to *dining* to *diamond* based upon misperception. We expect that those who mishear will be unaware of the form they mishear, while those who are misheard are likely to notice pronunciations that are different than their own.

In Table 5, we consider people's impressions of the terms children use. When a person mentioned a term at all, we counted that person as knowing that term. From Table 5 we see that *dining needle* is most likely to be thought of as a child's term. This is to be expected if *dining* comes from misperception of *darning*. Those who know both terms may well see *dining* as a mispronunciation and thus childish. A similar phenomenon does not hold for *diamond needle*. Those who know this term seem to exist in splendid isolation: Only three people who first mention *darning* or *dining needle* have heard of *diamond needle*, while only one person who mentioned *diamond needle* first had heard of either of the other two.

When we asked people which term they use most, those who mentioned *darning needle* first were most likely to use *dragon fly* as shown in Table 6. Unfortunately, we have no convincing explanation for this fact.

In Table 7 we compare those who grew up in the area and know one of the three local terms with those who don't. The table shows that men are more likely than women to know at least one of the terms in question. Since *dragon fly* represents the national norm, women's lack of knowledge of the local terms can be seen as more toward the national norm. This, of course, is consonant with what we expect from other studies (e.g., Anshen 1969, Fischer 1958). However, further consideration complicates the situation. Women usually move to the national norm by acquiring a new variant. Here, everybody seems to be aware of the national norm and women express their allegiance to it by not knowing the local term. It is not clear how you go about not noting a local term.

Table 8 suggests a general movement toward the national norm, as those over thirty are more likely to have knowledge of the local terms.

As for the railing at the side of the highway, four people among two hundred did give *guide rail*, which shows that the phonological change is not limited to the one term, though it may be limited to cases where the new form coincides with a previously existing lexical item.

TABLE 1. *Area where subject grew up versus first word mentioned*

First word mentioned	Area	
	Long Island	New York City
darning	34 (47.2)	11 (28.9)
dining	19 (26.3)	17 (60.7)
diamond	19 (26.3)	10 (26.3)
	72	38

$\chi^2 = 3.44$ (not significant with 2 degrees of freedom).

TABLE 2. *First word in set mentioned versus age*

Age	First word mentioned		
	<i>darning</i>	<i>dining</i>	<i>diamond</i>
10-19	18 (40.0)	14 (37.8)	17 (56.7)
20-29	19 (42.2)	17 (45.9)	12 (40.0)
30+	8 (17.8)	6 (16.2)	1 (3.3)
	45	37	30

$\chi^2 = 4.68$ (not significant with 6 degrees of freedom).

TABLE 3. *First word in set mentioned versus sex*

Sex	First word mentioned		
	<i>darning</i>	<i>dining</i>	<i>diamond</i>
Male	21 (46.7)	14 (37.8)	15 (50.0)
Female	24 (53.3)	23 (62.2)	15 (50.0)
	45	37	30

$\chi^2 = 1.09$ (not significant with 2 degrees of freedom).

TABLE 4. *First word in set mentioned versus other word mentioned*

First word mentioned	Other word mentioned	
	In set	Other (including <i>dragon fly</i>)
<i>darning</i>	14 (31.1)	31 (68.7)
<i>dining</i>	5 (13.5)	32 (86.5)
<i>diamond</i>	1 (3.3)	29 (96.7)
	20	92

$\chi^2 = 10.02$ (significant at the .01 level with 2 degrees of freedom).

TABLE 5. *Word known versus word children are said to use*

Word children said to use	Word in set known		
	<i>darning</i>	<i>dining</i>	<i>diamond</i>
Same	11 (22)	35 (64.8)	11 (34.3)
Other	<u>39</u> (78)	<u>19</u> (35.2)	<u>21</u> (65.7)
	50	55	32

$\chi^2 = 20.53$ (significant at the .005 level with 2 degrees of freedom).

TABLE 6. *First word in set mentioned versus word most used*

First word mentioned	Word most used	
	In set	dragon fly
<i>darning</i>	18 (41.9)	25 (58.1)
<i>dining</i>	25 (71.4)	10 (28.6)
<i>diamond</i>	<u>18</u> (62.1)	<u>11</u> (37.9)
	61	46

$\chi^2 = 7.3$ (significant at the .05 level with 2 degrees of freedom).

TABLE 7. *Knowledge of terms versus sex*

Knowledge of one of the terms	Sex	
	Male	Female
Yes	50 (66.7)	62 (45.6) = 112
No	25 (33.3)	74 (54.4) = 97

$\chi^2 = 8.67$ (significant at the .005 level with 1 degree of freedom).

TABLE 8. *Knowledge of terms versus age*

Knowledge of the terms	Age	
	Under 30	30 and older
Yes	97 (86.7)	15 (13.3)
No	97 (96.0)	4 (4.0)

$\chi^2 = 5.82$ (significant at the .025 level with 1 degree of freedom).

CONCLUSION

Our particular hypothesis, that *darning needle* moved to *dining needle* and then to *diamond needle*, is supported by the data. We suggested that the first movement might be facilitated by a combination of two factors. First of all, the phonological proximity of /ar/ and /ay/ in the dialect allows for misperception of the original term. Second, this original term may not be semantically motivated, a factor that would at least not discourage the misperception. The move from *dining* to *diamond* has no phonetic explanation and we attributed it solely to the semantic inscrutability of *dining needle*. All of this seems reasonable and there is nothing in the data to contradict it.

As for social factors, we have found no particular determinant among age, sex, and region for the choice among the three terms. We did find that some users had certain notions about the distribution of the terms; *dining needle* was most likely to be thought of as a child’s term. We do not yet know whether this is indeed true, but the term is found among speakers over fifty years of age, and is therefore not childish because novel.

Not everyone knows any local terms, and women are much less likely than men to know any local term at all. This accords with many previous studies on movement toward the national speech norm. Such movement, however, is puzzling in the light of the great vitality of the local terms. After all, two of the three were previously unrecorded, and are clearly new.

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