

Why are we so illuded?

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Why are many people – including, on occasion, linguists – inclined to systematic dogged misapprehensions about variation in language (like the five below, from postings to the Language Log over the past two years)? These illusions follow from psychological processes and social practices, combined with bits of language ideology, and are facilitated by the fact that hardly anyone has a panoptic view of language variation; we mostly have to think about it on the basis of our personal experience.

(1.1) **Recency Illusion:** If you've noticed something only recently, you believe that it originated recently. (Example: a widespread belief that the case selection in *between you and I* is a recent innovation.)

(1.2) **Antiquity Illusion:** If you do something yourself, you believe that you always have, and that people in general have done it for a long time. (Example: the idea that *the whole nine yards* is a venerable idiom.)

(2.1) **Out-Group Illusion:** Things you view as novel, or simply bad, are characteristic of groups you don't see yourself as belonging to. (Example: an Australian's assertion that "double *is*" is not found in Australia, but is probably an Irish thing.)

(2.2) **In-Group Illusion:** Things you view as characteristic of groups you see yourself as belonging to are peculiar to those groups, not shared by outsiders. (Example: many Pittsburghers' belief that items like *needs washed* and *redd up* are unique to their city.)

(3) **Frequency Illusion:** Once you notice a phenomenon, you believe it happens a whole lot. (Example: a widespread belief that quotative *all* occurs "all the time" in the speech of some (young) people.)

The Frequency Illusion is a result of two well-known psychological processes, selective attention (noticing things that are salient to us, disregarding the rest) and confirmation bias (looking for things that support our hypotheses, disregarding potential counterevidence), which also contribute to the two group illusions, through the mediation of various social divisions between Us and Them (which make certain features salient to us). In the case of the Recency and Out-Group Illusions, certain features are salient because they are judged to be bad, in particular because they are perceived as innovative; innovations are (*ceteris paribus*) bad, because, according to a widespread piece of language ideology, innovations arise from laziness, ignorance, and putting on airs.

The age and group illusions depend on our inclination to take ourselves as the measure of all things; we treat our own experiences as fair samples of the phenomena in question. Even when other possibilities are available, we tend to generalize from our own perceptions, reasoning by anecdote; ordinary people don't reason like scientists and will often resist expert opinion in favor of their own.

Of course, most of the time, there's no alternative; hardly anyone is in a position to sample the phenomena scientifically, almost all of us are in a state of ignorance, so our perceptions, memories, beliefs, and opinions are all we have to go on. We're set up to be illuded.

(490 words)