A canny bit of variation: The syntactic and semantic distribution of canny in the North East of England

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Dialect guides depict canny, a term commonly used as ‘a general epithet of approbation or satisfaction’ (‘canny, adj.’, OED), as characteristic of North-East English. However, the literature often conflates this adjectival meaning in (1) with other functions of canny in (2)-(4). This paper presents results of a quantitative variationist analysis of all uses of canny in the Diachronic Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English (Corrigan et al. 2010-2012) which contains interviews of North-East residents from the 1970s, 1990s and 2000s.

(1) Adjective: she was proper canny
(2) Intensifier: it’s canny expensive
(3) Adverb: everything’s going along canny
(4) Modifier in degree expressions: we go to the pictures a canny bit

335 tokens of canny from DECTE were analysed in terms of their frequency and linguistic/social conditioning. This data was supplemented with acceptability judgements and attitudes elicited via an online questionnaire, completed by 48 local residents.

Results show that while adjective and (rare) adverb canny in (1) and (3) were used in the 1970s, intensifier and modifier canny in (2) and (4) first emerged in the 1990s. In the 2000s, the intensifier is used only by young speakers but is as frequent as the adjective overall. Production and perception reveal that this relatively new intensifier favours collocation with positive adjectives (reflecting canny’s original, positive meaning), thus is not fully grammaticalised. Canny’s frequency in different degree expressions is meanwhile explained by the phrases’ syntactic distribution (Doetjes 1997). Expressions such as a canny bit can select many phrase types thus occur (and are perceived to occur) at higher frequencies than those that modify only VPs (e.g. a canny while) or NPs (e.g. a canny few).

This research highlights the value of combining production and perception data and demonstrates how the syntactic-semantic distributions of a single linguistic form can reveal trajectories and mechanisms of change.

Keywords: language change, diachronic, perceptions.