CHAPTER 3

Aspects of Language Change

3.1 Introduction

There appears to be universal agreement among linguists that a living language – in the sense of ‘a language still in vernacular use’ (OED, s.v. living) – must change (see, for instance, Labov 1994: 9; Trask 2010: 1). However, as Kretzschmar (2009: 13) notes, linguistics has yet to reach the type of widespread agreement on basic ideas that characterizes many of the natural sciences; in this case, we do not have complete consensus on (i) what a language is and (ii) what it means that it changes. I will therefore devote this chapter to discussing these concepts.

The account of language and language change given in this chapter will demonstrate that several factors help to create a false impression that LModE is characterized by relative linguistic stability. At least in the area of grammar, the type of change facilitated by the weak links that characterized many LModE networks does not necessarily lead to the kind of independent innovation that is necessary for categorical change (in the sense of ‘emergence of new features’). Instead, weak links mainly favour change through the propagation of existing features (typically accompanied by propagation-dependent innovation). Although a large number of LModE idiolects underwent change, many of those changes are invisible on the communal-language level, because they mainly involve the propagation of features that already existed in some idiolects by 1700. By combining (i) an idiolectal perspective on usage, (ii) a separation of the concept of language change into independent innovation, propagation, and propagation-dependent innovation, and (iii) a recognition that independent innovation, propagation, and propagation-dependent innovation differ in their sensitivity to social factors, I will resolve the stability paradox outlined in Chapter 2.
In this chapter, I first discuss the views of language (Section 3.2) and language change (Section 3.3) that underlie the account in this book. Section 3.4 addresses the role of linguistic and extralinguistic factors in language change. The ensuing section (3.5) compares cases of propagation from above and from below, including the relationship between prescription and actual language use. Section 3.6 summarizes my account in this chapter and briefly addresses two other issues that are relevant to the issue of language change in general.

### 3.2 Language: Systems and Idiolects

The notion of *language* has been characterized in different ways by scholars; for instance, Bybee (2015: 9) describes language as “an activity that involves both cognitive access (recalling words and constructions from memory) and the motor routines of production (articulation)”, while Croft (2000: 26) argues that a language is “the population of utterances in a speech community”. However, the most popular hyperonym for *language* is arguably neither *activity* nor *population*, but *system* (Kretzschmar 2009: 1). Labov (1994: 9) conceives of language “as the instrument of communication used by a speech community, a commonly accepted system of associations between arbitrary forms and their meanings”. Labov’s characterization highlights the existence of a system as well as the use of that system by a community of speakers for the purpose of communication. That double focus is an important reason why language is a difficult entity to describe. On the one hand, language as a system is used for communication between speakers; on the other hand, complete versions of the systems themselves exist only within individual speakers, in the form of idiolects.¹ (The idiolect of a native speaker who has completed the acquisition process is complete in this sense, but can still undergo change – see Section 3.6.) This relationship between system and use is related to classic distinctions such as langue vs. parole, competence vs. performance, and I(nternal)-language vs. E(xternal)-language.

A great deal of research in linguistics appears to share an underlying assumption about language that has important consequences for the definition of language change. It is often implicitly assumed that

¹ There is of course an immense amount of language output stored externally to speakers’ idiolects, as recordings, books, corpora, etc.; however, these sources illustrate but do not constitute complete systems. Nor do descriptions of languages in dictionaries, grammars, pronunciation dictionaries, etc. count as full accounts (Kretzschmar 2009: 7), as they are typically incomplete as well as generalized compared with idiolects.
a communal language like English is an independent entity that (first-language) users share. It is recognized that, within this communal language, there is intra-speaker as well as inter-speaker variation in relative preferences for certain linguistic variants, for example *that* vs. *which* (or other options) as subject-position relative markers in restrictive clauses with inanimate antecedents; it is also possible that some speakers of English are categorical in their output and use only one of the options (for instance, *which* is very rare in this context among many American speakers). But in a historical account, the communal language English would typically be considered to “have” both *that* and *which* as relative markers in this linguistic environment if both variants are used by at least some native speakers, which also means that the structure of English as a communal language may be considered unchanged in this regard as long as both *that* and *which* are attested in language users’ output. This notion of language tallies with that established by Saussure ([1916] 1986), that is, the sum total of the patterns stored in the minds of linguistically linked speakers. In Saussure’s framework, linguistic structure exists outside individual speakers as a “social product” of the language faculty and as “a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty” (Saussure [1916] 1986: 9–10, quoted in Kretzschmar 2009: 42).

The crucial problem for such views concerns the location of this social product. We can only observe language use as output; the underlying systems are stored inside each individual language user. Our impression of the incidence of linguistic features in English is created by the cumulative effect of output from a large number of idiolects; in historical linguistics, this output tends to be heavily biased in favour of the male, the literate, and the wealthy, who were more likely to produce texts, and whose texts are also more likely to have survived (Kytö and Pahta 2012: 125). However, the collected output by several language users taken together is essentially the output of an abstract communal language that never existed as an independent entity, even though, as Johnstone (1996: 11) notes, it is often treated as if it had an independent existence. As mentioned above, this communal language is typically assumed to be structurally intact as long as all features – phonemes, syntagms, and so on – are still present in the cumulative output. Even though a large number of language users may have stopped using a feature (or never used it in the first place), the fact that some speakers whose output has survived used it secures its place in the communal language. In this sense, focussing on cumulative output biases our impressions of languages in the direction of sameness.
Any named language or variety is an abstract construct and an observational artefact (Johnstone 1996: 11, 19; Mufwene 2014: 17; Kretzschmar 2015b: 34; Hickey 2020: 48) in that several users’ output is considered to represent the same language even though each user’s idiolect is unique. Mutual intelligibility does not require identical idiolects (Mufwene 2014: 15), and what we call one language is a little different for each speaker (Johnstone 1996: 3; see Barth and Kapatsinski 2017: 205–6 for examples of such individual differences). The rules of a communal language are constructed by analysts based on after-the-fact extrapolation and generalization (Mufwene 2008: 117; Kretzschmar 2015b: 3). Maguire et al. (2013: 230–1) make a similar distinction for phonology when they point out that phonology is a property of an individual language user and that a property of a speech community (e.g. a merger) is not necessarily shared by all its members. Language users do not command the full range of variation attested in the communal language, as their personal history constrains their repertoires (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 19).

Since communal languages are abstract constructs projected from properties shared among idiolects, the boundaries between them are typically fuzzy (Mufwene 2008: 14). However, regular interaction between speakers and a desire to be understood and to collaborate generally result in idiolectal convergence (Johnstone 1996: 5; Mufwene 2014: 19); idiolects become more similar as features are propagated via network links. Communication is further facilitated by the fact that most children acquire a first language based on interaction with adult speakers whose idiolects are similar to those of language users with whom the children will interact later in life. Assessments of linguistic similarity between idiolects therefore typically lead to agreement on who counts as a speaker of a named language, but there are exceptions. For example, speakers along a dialect continuum typically understand one another as long as they have acquired their idiolects in geographical proximity to each other, but this unbroken sequence of mutually intelligible idiolects is at odds with the perception that this continuum is made up of different, discrete languages that are not mutually intelligible. To resolve this paradox, a framework that allows the same individual speaker to exhibit variable linguistic behaviour along what Kretzschmar (2009: 62) calls a linguistic continuum is needed. Mutually intelligible idiolects along a dialect continuum can then be mapped onto

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2 Communication can of course also result in dissociation, in which case speakers develop features that are different from those used by a group whose usage is considered undesirable (Hickey 2020: 44).

3 Dixon (1997: 7–8), however, minimizes the problems associated with using mutual intelligibility as a criterion for sameness of language.
different communal languages—say, Portuguese and Spanish—based on factors such as linguistic evidence of similarity and difference, what language the speakers self-report as using, and what standard they aim at in formal styles (if standardization has taken place). Conversely, a Moroccan idiolect and a Jordanian idiolect may be considered to belong to the same language—Arabic—even though they are not mutually intelligible, because the speakers of those idiolects self-report as speaking Arabic (and, in this case, because they may share a diglossic “high” variety, namely Modern Standard Arabic). A similar state of affairs arguably applied to English historically. Knowles (1997: 37) suggests that “[i]n the early twentieth century, forestry workers from Gloucestershire and miners from Durham would have had enormous difficulty in understanding each other”; owing to limitations in the impact of standardization and near-universal schooling, members of such speech communities may have lacked a common standard to switch to in cases of communication breakdown (see also Croft 2000: 16 on sibling languages and polytypic languages).

As mentioned above, Croft (2000: 26) proposes a different definition of language, namely “the population of utterances in a speech community”, and argues that this is “a spatiotemporally bounded set of actual individuals” (i.e. utterances). Those utterances consist of linguemes, such as phonemes or expressions of semantic structures, which may undergo replication, and which may have different variants. However, there are a few problems with this perspective. First, although utterances are spatio-temporally bounded entities, it is not clear how long an utterance remains part of the language; for instance, spoken utterances have a very brief existence unless they are recorded, while we still have access to written English from over 1,000 years ago. An idiolect, in contrast, is spatio-temporally bound to an individual with a definite lifespan (although an idiolect can undergo change over time). Secondly, although Croft’s (2000) definition of language identifies a spatio-temporally bounded set of tokens, it is difficult to say where such a language is located; as all members of a speech community have unique idiolects, the population of utterances cannot be traced back to any one mind that could have generated all of them. Both the utterance and the idiolect are vital levels of analysis in the sense that they both carry important

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4 Croft (2000: 26) requires that the utterances be comprehended in the community for them to belong to the same language. However, as observed by Smith (2007: 12), it is possible for speakers to adopt a feature even though they are ignorant of what its precise meaning was to the speaker(s) who used it first; moreover, knowing whether speakers comprehend an utterance presupposes knowledge of their idiolects, which makes idiolects part of the definition of language regardless.

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linguistic information. Moreover, they are in a state of mutual dependence on each other: in order for an idiolect to develop, a language user must be exposed to other language users’ utterances and to reactions to his/her own utterances; conversely, the language user’s idiolect at any given time constrains the ways in which s/he can, and is likely to, formulate and interpret utterances. However, I argue that, although utterances are what we can actually study, the abstract construct we call English is made up of an accumulation of idiolects, not of utterances. An idiolect is not observable, but we can make careful generalizations from language users’ output to their idiolects. In historical linguistics, the most important constraint on generalization is that we have very limited access to spoken output (see Kytö and Walker 2003 for a discussion of this “bad data” problem).

The individual idiolects that are considered to belong to the same communal language may differ quite radically from one another, which makes studying “the history of English” seem problematic; the English language appears to have been reduced to an abstraction that does not constitute a real entity (see Croft 2000: 2). However, this does not disqualify English — or any other language — from linguistic interest as a level of analysis. To begin with, in spite of the fact that it involves abstraction, there is a great deal of common-sense merit in retaining a label like language as a hyperonym for a large number of relatively similar idiolects. After all, most speakers instinctively group output as well as the idiolects of the language users who produce it into languages. As Keller (1994 [1990]: 127) puts it, “there is nothing dishonourable in being an epiphenomenon”.

Moreover, many of the problems inherent in the notion of language are alleviated if communal languages are not regarded as homogeneous, discrete entities. In a useful analogy, Mufwene (2008: 26) likens a communal language to a viral species and idiolects to organisms classified as belonging to that species “based on family resemblance” (but cf. Lightfoot 2003 for a different position). This distinction is of some importance: just as not all organisms classified as belonging to a species have the same DNA, not all idiolects contain all features of the communal language, as mentioned above (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 19; see also Milroy and Milroy 1985: 346–7). That circumstance does not invalidate the notion of a species — or a language — as a category. Unlike a biological organism, whose cells typically have the same DNA, however, idiolects exhibit internal variation (Mufwene 2008: 66). Both the idiolectal level and the language level — and a number of significant levels between them, for
example socially based groups of speakers and externally based groups of
texts (genres) – are valid objects of inquiry.
In this book, I therefore use convenient labels like language, English, and
LModE for communal languages and language states; but the use of such
a label does not imply that its referent has clear boundaries, internal
homogeneity, or an independent existence. Even more importantly, it
does not imply that LModE – or any other language-state – can change
in itself. This brings us to the notion of language change, which also needs
to be discussed from an idiolectal perspective.

3.3 Language Change: Innovation and Propagation
If a language is an abstract construct, as argued in Section 3.2, change in
a language is also necessarily an abstraction from the events that are actually
taking place. As Croft (2000: 4) puts it, “[l]anguages don’t change; people
change language through their actions” (see also Fischer 2016: 238–9). Similarly, Milroy and Milroy (1985: 345) argue that “it is not languages
that innovate; it is speakers who innovate” and that “[t]he reflexes of
speaker-innovations are then observed in language states”.

A statement to the effect that a language has changed is typically based
on cumulative evidence from output, which in turn is assumed to be
indicative of language users’ idiolects. Mufwene (2008: 181) argues that
histories of languages “have disregarded I-languages (or idiolects), although
the immediate causes of changes that cumulate to produce evolution (at
the communal level) lie nowhere but in the communicative acts of indi-
vidual speakers” (see also Joseph 1992: 127). Nevalainen et al. (2020a: 4–5)
summarize the three perspectives that have characterized analyses of the
rate of change in languages: comparing stages of the language as a whole
(e.g. Old vs. Middle vs. Early Modern English); comparing different
structural levels (e.g. word order vs. morphology); and comparing different
stages in the trajectory of an individual change. All of these perspectives
implicitly take the abstraction that is the communal language as the object
of investigation.

The concept of the individual language user’s idiolect as central to
language change is of course not new; for instance, as McMahon (1994:
226) notes, idiolects were important to Paul’s ([1891] 1978) views on sound
change. What I am trying to add to this perspective is a set of theoretical
and methodological principles for how to reconcile an idiolectal view of
language change with social-network theory and the corpus-based study of
grammar.
A speaker’s idiolect is taken to include knowledge of what is possible as well as what is probable. Our ability to use (often subconscious) probabilistic thinking about our idiolects allows us to use variable proportions of linguistic features under different linguistic and extralinguistic conditions (see Kroch 1989: 202), in line with what Trudgill (2000: 34–5) calls “inherent variability” in speakers’ output. However, in language change from below, the choices speakers make are largely subconscious (Labov 2001: 409–10).

The fact that language change is an abstraction from actual changes in idiolects also helps to explain why it cannot be predicted (on predicting language change, see also Keller 1994 [1990]: 70–1; Lightfoot 2003: 120; Kretzschmar 2009: 179; Kretzschmar 2015b: 1; Mathieu and Truswell 2017: 5; Willis 2017: 493). To begin with, we do not have enough information on idiolectal change to disregard the possibility that at least some changes might be random. Moreover, we would need information on what linguistic and extralinguistic (psychological, sociological, etc.) factors constrain each individual idiolect in order to construct a predictive model, since the variation that underlies change can only be fully explained at the idiolectal level (Johnstone 1996: 8; see Croft 2000: 2–3 for a discussion of whether change could be predicted even in such a best-case scenario). Without the ability to directly observe idiolects and the factors that influence them, we can at best make probabilistic assessments about what types of change are more or less likely (which is nevertheless worth doing).

Moreover, if we look at the language as the unit that undergoes change, there is a risk that change will go unnoticed. Croft (2000: 3) notes that processes of change can be categorized as inherent change, where “a single object that exists over time” undergoes change, or as replication, where a new entity is created that preserves most, but not all, of the structure of a parent entity. A language has often been treated by linguists as a real entity undergoing inherent change. In reality, however, the entities that undergo change exist at the idiolect and utterance levels, and neither of those levels is necessarily captured in analyses that group several language users’ output together. (To take an extreme example, as long as changes cancel one

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5 This model would also have to include such information on each speaker whose idiolect does not change in order to fully address the actuation problem, that is, why a change occurs — or does not occur — at a given time and place (Labov 2001: 466; see also Milroy and Milroy 1983: 342 and Mufwene 2008: 22); as Milroy (1997: 313–14) notes, a theory of language change must account for change as well as lack thereof. In the present framework, the actuation problem could be expressed in terms of why a change takes place in one idiolect at a particular time, but not in other idiolects at the same time or in the same idiolect at a different time.
another out in the group of speakers investigated, each individual speaker in the group may in theory change their idiolect without those changes having any impact on the cumulative output.)

There are specific characteristics of LModE that make this variety especially likely to display stability in this regard. I will return to this issue when I discuss propagation from above and below in Section 3.5, but one such characteristic is of more general significance and should be mentioned here: the data set that we have access to. While this data set is rich compared with previous periods, much of it consists of written output that has been affected in one way or another by standardization (see Section 3.5.2). Standard varieties may promote other variants compared with those favoured in most idiolects and styles, for example *whom* rather than *who* as an object pronoun (Kretzschmar 2015b: 102). The features promoted in the standard variety are often conservative; they may also be disfavoured in many other varieties owing to, among other things, clashes between overt and covert prestige. The overall impression researchers get from output affected by standardization is then one of greater stability than what is actually the case, as features that may otherwise have disappeared from the language may be retained in the standard variety, which predom- inates in the available data set. LModE is in fact at the point where stability is most likely to be claimed for the language on this basis: much of the period 1700–1900 falls between (i) the selection of a standard for educated written usage and (ii) the use of recording technologies to preserve informal spoken usage.

There are two ways in which an idiolect can undergo change. First, a speaker may use a new linguistic feature without having been exposed to that feature in linguistic output before. Following Croft (2000), I refer to this phenomenon as innovation. A wide definition of what may count as a new linguistic feature is intended: this may be a wholly new feature, different functions, senses, or realizations of existing features, or the absence of a feature that would previously have been used by the speaker in a given context. As Mufwene (2008: 178) notes, a great deal of linguistic “recycling” takes place as features that are already available in idiolects are used in novel ways; see also Lass (1997: 316–24) on exaptation. In addition, I take the use of a linguistic feature with a higher or lower frequency than previously to indicate language change; indeed, many of the changes studied in Chapters 5–8 involve frequency changes. It is arguable that shifts in frequency do not constitute changes in themselves, but are rather results of changes in the meanings, functions, contexts of use, etc. of the feature (cf. Croft 2000: 57). It may also be difficult to pinpoint at what
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point a speaker begins to use a feature with a different frequency, and people exposed to, say, a higher frequency of a feature in output may interpret it as a qualitative extension to new contexts (as a type of propagation-dependent innovation, which is discussed below). Nevertheless, frequency changes are at least manifestations of language change.

At this level of analysis, the individual language user’s linguistic history is what determines whether a change comprises innovation: if the user has not been exposed to output containing the change before they produce such output themselves, innovation has taken place. It is highly likely that the same change will be introduced by a large number of language users independently of one another within a short period of time, as similar factors are likely to act simultaneously on many idiolects (Bergs 2005: 37–8); all such language users are innovators. The entrenchment of one usage in a large number of idiolects may facilitate the development of another, analogical, and/or similar usage, so that usage 1 becoming conventional enables or facilitates usage 2, an extension of usage 1 (De Smet 2016: 99–100). For instance, the establishment of the progressive passive may have facilitated the emergence of the progressive of be, as both constructions contain the sequence be being. If those constructions were indeed linked, the fact that a great many idiolects had incorporated the progressive passive meant that a large number of language users had also become likely to innovate the progressive of be independently of one another.

Most innovations die out and are not successful (Milroy 1997: 313; Mufwene 2008: 15, 66), because “deviation from convention” is typically avoided (De Smet 2016: 86), and because pressure to achieve successful communication causes convergence to be favoured (Mufwene 2014: 18). The concept of success here is complex. The immediate criterion for success is to be understood, but interlocutors also wish to satisfy, for instance, their material and face needs, and language use is an instrument in this regard (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 240). This function of language puts pressure on language users to speak in such a way that they are not only understood, but also approved of, by their interlocutors.

The second way in which an idiolect can change is through propagation. Linguistic output is the medium through which changes spread between

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6 The development of these constructions is a much-discussed topic, and other factors may have been at work here (see, for instance, Warner 1997; Denison 1998: 150–8; Pratt and Denison 2000). The argument for surface similarity is based on the progressive passive being attested a few decades before the progressive of be.

7 I use propagation rather than the alternative term diffusion for the transfer of a linguistic feature from one idiolect to another, as diffusion is sometimes understood as the importation of features from
idiolects through propagation; the idiolects themselves are not in contact. Let us assume that feature X is part of some idiolects in a speech community but is not present in idiolect P. The speaker with idiolect P can of course innovate feature X independently, but that speaker is more likely to incorporate it into their idiolect through propagation: the speaker with idiolect P is exposed to output containing feature X and may then – consciously or, more typically, subconsciously – adapt to that output by incorporating feature X into idiolect P. The propagation of feature X becomes noticeable when idiolect P is subsequently manifested in output containing feature X. (As I discuss below, feature X may also be subject to propagation-dependent innovation in this process.)

Not all linguists agree that both innovation and propagation constitute language change (Croft 2000: 5); for instance, Milroy (1992b: 79, emphasis original) argues that “a change is not a change until it has been adopted by more than one speaker”, that is, change requires propagation. In addition, there seems to be disagreement on how much propagation is required for language change to be said to have occurred. Milroy and Milroy (1985: 347) suggest that we tend not to label innovations as changes until they have undergone propagation both to and beyond a community; Raumolin-Brunberg and Nurmi (2011: 252) suggest that an innovation must have been incorporated by a group of people to be considered language change; and Traugott and Trousdale (2013: 2) argue that innovation is only “potential for change” and that “[f]or an innovation to count as a change, it must have been replicated across populations of speakers resulting in conventionalization, the integration of the innovation in a tradition of speaking or writing, as evidenced by textual materials left to us”. Smith (2007: 11), in contrast, argues that change occurs when an innovation is propagated to just one more speaker (see also Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 2). If the idiolect is taken as the basis for language and the true locus of language change, Smith’s perspective makes more sense: one language user’s idiolect is not affected by whether or not a feature that the user has adopted is also adopted into other idiolects. (Whether or not the feature also spreads into other idiolects may affect its fate in an individual idiolect through social pressure to continue or stop using it, but that pressure is external to the idiolect itself.) Moreover, it is difficult to decide how many idiolects, communities, genres, or linguistic contexts must have been affected by other systems, as opposed to transmission, which is reserved for parent-to-child transfer of language (see, for instance, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 230).
a linguistic innovation before we can say that the language itself has changed (see Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 56).

However, if change in one idiolect through propagation is regarded as language change, innovation should also be counted as change: the innovator’s idiolect must have changed for them to be able to produce an utterance containing the innovation. Croft (2000: 5) also argues that both innovation and propagation constitute language change. In addition, there is a practical argument for regarding both innovation and propagation as change: it is impossible to say with certainty whether a change in an idiolect constitutes innovation or propagation, as we can never know whether the new feature had been produced before by someone to whose output the relevant speaker had been exposed (see Milroy and Milroy 1985: 348).

Accepting that the true locus of language change is the idiolect makes it possible to redefine the definition of change in the communal language. Communal-language change is an abstraction based on a cumulation of instances of the same change – or very similar changes – which affect idiolects regarded as belonging to the same communal language (cf. Mufwene 2008: 59). As only speaker output can be observed, it is typically assumed that quantitative or qualitative changes in cumulative output are indicative of changes in idiolects – and, conversely, that stability in the cumulative output indicates idiolectal stability. However, especially in historical linguistics, the cumulative output is not always a faithful reflection of developments that took place in idiolects – which are the units undergoing true change.

As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, LModE has often been argued to feature less structural change than previous periods. Change that is considered structural is typically categorical; for instance, speakers may replace feature X (say, thou pronouns) entirely with feature Y (say, you pronouns). In this case, histories of English often claim that you pronouns have categorically replaced thou pronouns in the second-person singular, which has led to a loss of number distinctions in English second-person pronouns (except for the reflexive paradigm).

Such an analysis ignores varieties and genres where the distinction is maintained, either through conservatism (thou forms being preserved) or through innovation (alternative plural forms such as y’all, youse, and you guys being used in contrast with singular you). Features that are generally regarded as non-standard are more likely to be ignored in this way, as histories of English tend to focus on the development of what became the standard variety.
However, at the true locus of change, that is, an individual language user’s idiolect, all that is required for change to have taken place is that the idiolect is different from its previous state owing to innovation and/or propagation. It is irrelevant whether or not the same change leads to structural changes in the communal language to which the idiolect belongs. Moreover, since social networks crucially involve individual language users, and since each individual language user has their own idiolect, language change of the type that is sensitive to speakers’ social networks can really be measured only in terms of the number of idiolects that have changed. Given the incomplete nature of the evidence we have at our disposal, such measurements are approximate at best. Language change on the communal level is thus in itself a fuzzy category.

From the perspective of innovation vs. propagation, LModE clearly features a large amount of propagation, which becomes visible to us to the extent that such changes reached communities whose output has been preserved. Some features become more or less frequent in various idiolects and speech communities without any feature disappearing from the communal language. Some changes affect most idiolects, for example the increase in the frequency and uses of the progressive (see Section 2.4.3). In other cases, the result is rather increased differentiation among idiolects, for example the division between rhotic and non-rhotic speakers in Britain. Propagation may also lead to increased variability within idiolects, as certain features come to be associated with particular linguistic or extralinguistic contexts of use; this is the mechanism behind the increased genre differentiation in LModE discussed in Biber and Finegan (1997), which is an important characteristic of LModE; as Görlach (2004: 100) notes, we cannot fully explain the development of English without considering the genre parameter. Several of the case studies reported on in Chapters 5–8 involve features that become increasingly characteristic of particular written genres. These types of propagation may of course co-occur.

Processes of propagation can account for many changes in phonology and grammar that have been attested in LModE. Most changes also involve some measure of innovation while propagation is going on (see below). But what we do not see much evidence of is the appearance of categorical change through innovation. The result gives the impression of relative stability on the communal-language level, despite the large number of idiolects that have undergone change – a number that is the truest measure of the type of language change that correlates with network ties.

LModE lexis, though, seems to exhibit different behaviour in this regard. Although the radical growth of the English vocabulary during
part of the LModE period may not constitute structural change, the available evidence indicates that large-scale lexical innovation took place. However, a large number of new lexemes in LModE are borrowings from other languages (see Section 2.4.1). The status of such loanwords as innovations is doubtful, since lexical borrowing presupposes some degree of bilingualism. A speaker who begins to use, say, a French word in English is not an innovator, but rather the locus of a special type of propagation, in which a lexeme that exists in their French idiolect is adopted into their English idiolect, typically with some adaptation to the morphophonology of the target language. (The same applies in principle to cases where there are no native speakers of the donor language, e.g. loans from Classical Greek and Latin in LModE.) This perspective drastically reduces the amount of lexical innovation in LModE. In addition, lexical change is difficult to assess regarding the number of idiolects affected. It is typically assumed that a word is part of English vocabulary when it has been attested in one or several texts produced in English, but as discussed in Section 2.4.1, many new lexemes that were used in some speech communities most likely never reached the majority of idiolects, which means that counting every attestation of a new lexeme as a change overestimates the change on the idiolectal level.

Propagation is involved in all the syntactic changes examined in Chapters 5–8. Language users were exposed to uses of a linguistic feature that were not at the time part of their idiolects, in terms of, for instance, the incidence of the feature in particular genres, and adopted those uses. When a sufficient number of idiolects had changed to incorporate these uses, the results are visible as changes in the genre norms of the communal language. Propagation leads to colloquialization (see Section 4.3.1) if the change in the communal language results in a feature that is characteristic of informal speech increasing in frequency in some but not all written genres; for instance, not-contraction (e.g. They can’t sing; see Chapter 5) was part of a great many language users’ idiolects, but with stylistic constraints that appear to have changed across the 1800s. In the case of densification (see Section 4.3.2), features that encode phrasal complexity (e.g. nominal premodifiers; see Chapter 7) instead become more characteristic of output belonging to certain genres with a high informational load.

Innovation that consists in categorical change does occur in LModE; oft-cited cases include the progressive passive and the get-passive. There are also some features that die out or survive only in restricted contexts, for example be as a perfect auxiliary and the passival construction in The house is building (see Section 2.4.3). Moreover, we typically know only about
innovations that were successful in the sense that they underwent propagation to other idiolects; a large number of unsuccessful innovations are likely to have appeared but died out before they showed up in texts that have survived and been studied by linguists. But if we tentatively relate the amount of successful (structural) innovation to that of propagation, LModE may well feature a low innovation-to-propagation ratio compared with other periods in the history of English. In Sections 3.5–3.6, I will discuss some reasons for this possible state of affairs.

So far in this chapter, innovation and propagation have been treated as discrete processes. However, the two are not so easily separated in practice. First, what looks like innovation may in fact be propagation. As discussed above, the introduction of a loanword is in fact a result of intra-speaker propagation between two idiolects belonging to the same speaker. This type of propagation is not limited to lexis. In so-called linguistic areas, several languages may come to share the same linguistic feature owing to propagation between bilingual individuals, for example the development of a postposed definite article in several languages in the Balkans (Chambers and Trudgill 1998: 168–70). The feature that undergoes this type of propagation is typically adapted to the structure of the recipient idiolect, which means that innovation and propagation become entangled: the (partly) bilingual speaker is likely to change the feature – and thus innovate in the recipient idiolect – in the process of propagation (see Section 3.6 for further discussion). We therefore need to distinguish independent innovation, which is what I have mainly discussed above, from propagation-dependent innovation, which takes place during the process of propagation.

Propagation-dependent innovation is not restricted to cases where the donor and recipient idiolects are considered to belong to different languages. Smith (2007: 18–21) notes that sound change may happen because speakers overshoot or undershoot the target (Smith’s terms are hyperadaptation and hypoadaptation) as they attempt to adopt a new phonological system, and suggests that this phenomenon may provide a partial explanation for the Great Vowel Shift (Smith 2007: 132–4). Similar effects are possible in syntax, where several types of language change involve one type or another of reanalysis. Many studies of language change point to a stage

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8 The status of reanalysis as a process has been the topic of some discussion in recent years. While De Smet (2009) questions whether the concept of reanalysis is needed as a type of change, Traugott and Trousdale (2010: 38–9) claim that reanalysis is the dominant mechanism compared with analogy. In later work, for example Traugott and Trousdale (2013: 21), the term neoanalysis is sometimes preferred.
where output is ambiguous such that a linguistic feature can be seen as having two different functions: the established function A and a new function B. For instance, *be going to* + [infinitive] as an expression of future (function B) is often assumed to have developed from a construction where *be going* expressed motion and *to* + [infinitive] purpose (function A). Speaker Y, who is exposed to the ambiguous output by speaker X, may interpret the feature as expressing function B and adopt it as such. In speaker Y’s own output, the use of the feature may then be extended to contexts that are compatible only with function B. Here too the line between innovation and propagation is blurred, because we cannot know whether speaker X intended the feature to have function A or function B in the ambiguous output. If the new function B was intended, it is propagated to speaker Y (who merely begins to use it in unambiguous contexts). But if speaker X intended for the feature to have the old function A and merely used it in a context that also allowed an interpretation in terms of the new function B, speaker Y is in fact innovating when using it unambiguously with function B—even though speaker Y is unaware of this innovation. Because idiolects are never themselves in direct contact, the transmission of features between idiolects consists in learning through inference, which may cause interpretation errors (Mufwene 2014: 20). Traugott and Trousdale (2013: 51–3) argue that speakers exposed to a feature attempt to match it with nodes in their idiolects; however, this matching may be different from that of the speaker who used the feature, and there may be no direct match available. Speakers and hearers may thus process the same utterance differently. Mufwene (2008: 2) even suggests that imperfect replication is the default way of copying linguistic structure, partly because speakers are under pressure to communicate and cannot wait until they have gathered sufficient output data on the idiolect that contains the new feature. Most processes of propagation thus involve some measure of innovation as well.

Although innovation and propagation may be difficult to distinguish in practice, they are separate in principle. The distinction between them becomes blurred chiefly because we have access only to linguistic output, not to idiolects, and because linguistic output—unlike, for instance, DNA—is frequently open to different interpretations. Nevertheless, as will become clear in Section 3.4, the difference between innovation and

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9 It is likely that reanalysis typically happens in smaller steps (see, for instance, Westergaard 2017 for “micro-cues”); the simplified example here is intended for illustration purposes.
propagation is important because of how these processes of change are conditioned.

3.4 The Role of Linguistic and Extralinguistic Factors in Innovation and Propagation

Most linguists would probably agree that language use and language change are constrained both by factors internal to the language itself (henceforth linguistic factors) and by factors external to the language (henceforth extralinguistic factors). In contrast, opinions differ regarding the relative weight that should be given to each group of factors. Nor do scholars necessarily agree on what counts as linguistic and extralinguistic; as Willis (2017: 492) notes, calling a change endogenous or exogenous raises “the question ‘endogenous or exogenous to what?’ Possible answers include ‘to the language’, ‘to the dialect’, ‘to the speech community’, ‘to the linguistic system’, ‘to syntax’ and ‘to the individual’.” In the present work, I will use the label linguistic for factors that are internal to the speaker’s idiolect (including any language-universal tendencies that are valid for all idiolects), while extralinguistic will be used for other factors.

The distinction between innovation and propagation made in Section 3.3 may shed light on the distinction between these two types of factor. Croft (2000: 8) makes a near-categorical distinction in this respect: functional factors are responsible for innovation, which involves form–function mapping, while propagation takes place via a selection mechanism that is social in nature. Croft’s use of functional and social appears to have close affinities with linguistic and extralinguistic as used in this work.

It seems intuitively reasonable to assume that independent innovation is not typically caused by extralinguistic factors. Since independent innovation is by definition nonconformist – a speaker is producing something that they have never been exposed to in output – a desire to identify with others would be unlikely to lead to independent innovation. Extralinguistic factors may of course play a role at the independent-innovation stage if speakers consciously or subconsciously innovate owing to a desire to distance themselves from other speakers, but that would account for only a small minority of changes. However,

10 In accepting that linguistic factors play a role in change, I am not arguing that language change makes the language “better” as such (cf. Milroy 1997: 321 on perfectly adapted languages).
11 Terms like desire should be taken to apply subconsciously here; as Mufwene (2008: 2) points out, speakers do not typically plan to change idiolects – their own or other speakers’ – through innovations (except presumably in cases of change from above).
Fischer (2016: 242) argues that innovation in phonology and lexis is more likely to be socially motivated than innovation in grammar, as morphosyntax is more dependent on multi-speaker innovation and on analogy. These three areas of language should thus perhaps be considered separately.

It is likely that lexis differs from phonology and grammar, owing to the relative prevalence of conscious, independent, lexical innovation, for example the introduction of new terms for recently discovered phenomena and avoidance of offensive language. The reason that these types of independent innovation can be extralinguistically motivated is thus that they often constitute change from above the level of social awareness. As regards phonology and grammar, the question arises whether it really is independent innovation that is extralinguistically motivated. It is impossible to be certain without access to the innovation stage, but my assumption is that, in change from below, independent innovation does not take place for extralinguistic reasons; rather, independent innovations that happen to make speakers’ idiolects more similar to idiolects that they wish to emulate are more likely to be propagated – for extralinguistic reasons. (Owing to imperfect replication, such propagation may also involve unintentional, propagation-dependent innovation.)

If we accept that most independent innovation in phonology and grammar is unlikely to be governed by extralinguistic factors, there are three options: independent innovation may be random, it may be caused by linguistic factors, or it may be due to a combination of the two. Random independent innovation would provide an appealing analogy with genetic mutation. However, certain types of linguistic change show that intralinguistic factors are likely to play a part in innovation. Focussing on grammar, De Smet (2016: 86) argues that though innovation is intrinsically unlikely, the probability of innovative use increases when this use deviates minimally from convention and there are well-established, analogically related conventional expressions in the speaker’s mental retrieval. The speaker’s current idiolect thus constrains their potential for innovation. How strict these constraints are is a matter of some debate among linguists. Mufwene (2014: 22) argues that speakers are constrained by their current idiolect as well as “their cognitive capacity”, and Milroy and Milroy (1985: 381) claim that linguistic constraints “sharply limit the class of possible innovations”. In contrast, Bergs (2005: 44) argues that no type of change is impossible, though some are very unlikely. This position tallies with the occurrence of counter-examples to several types of change that have been hypothesized to be unidirectional; as Traugott (2003: 124) puts it, “no change is likely to be exceptionless. Unidirectionality is a strong tendency.
manifested by particular sets of changes.” A combination of linguistic and random – or at least unidentified – factors may be the most likely cause of innovation.

As regards the propagation stage, Croft (2000: 39) argues that this phase, which is equivalent to evolutionary selection, “is governed largely if not exclusively by social forces”. However, there are good grounds for considering linguistic factors as potentially involved in this area as well.\footnote{I am grateful to Sarah Schwarz for drawing my attention to this possibility.} To begin with, if linguistic factors were involved only in innovation, and their influence was not absolute, we might expect to see more counter-examples to grammaticalization and related changes. Linguistically unlikely innovations that do occur could be selected by language users for social reasons, leading to less clear tendencies in language change than we actually find. Secondly, if linguistic factors are connected with language users’ idiolects, they would be expected to be involved in propagation as well as innovation, because the recipient’s idiolect takes part in propagation: the recipient has to adopt the innovation for propagation to take place.\footnote{This example sketches a scenario where a recipient adopts a feature that has just been innovated, but the mechanism would be the same if, for instance, the feature had been innovated some time ago and was being propagated through a new community.} This adoption may be partial only, owing to imperfect replication, in which case the recipient both propagates and innovates (see Section 3.3). But since the recipient has to incorporate (part of) the innovation into their idiolect, it makes sense that the current make-up of that idiolect will also affect the likelihood of incorporation. Denison (2003: 58) points out that propagation would not take place unless there was some social or functional advantage to the new form (see also Keller 1994 [1990]: 118 on costs and benefits). Thus features that are “a good fit” for the hearer’s idiolect arguably stand a better chance of being adopted. If a feature that is a candidate for propagation into an idiolect converges on or reinforces a feature that already exists in that idiolect, the likelihood of propagation increases, while non-convergent features have smaller chances of success (Mufwene 2008: 173; De Smet 2016: 86).

In addition, speech communities that feature regular interaction are likely to consist of speakers with similar idiolects, owing to convergence (Mufwene 2008: 15; Kretzschmar 2015a: 253) and the process by which we acquire our native language(s). This would in turn lead to inter-idiolectal similarities in the types of innovation and propagation that occur in the community: a feature that is “a good fit” for the community linguistically would be more likely to be independently innovated as well as propagated.
A language user who lacks the feature in question would undergo repeated exposure to it, which increases the social advantage of undergoing propagation and adopting it. Propagation-dependent innovation is also likely to occur; for instance, language users who are exposed to not-contractions (see Chapter 5) in a written genre where they have not encountered them before may attempt to imitate this usage in their own idiolects. When they do so, they may produce not-contracted forms that occur in a wider range of linguistic contexts than those in which they occurred in the target output. Speech sounds are likely to be affected by such processes before grammatical structures, as more minute variation is possible in phonetics than in grammar, and as sounds are more frequent than grammatical structures and may thus more easily become targets of accommodation (Hickey 2020: 43–4). But the general mechanism seems applicable to change in grammar as well. This type of propagation-dependent innovation may involve both linguistic and extralinguistic causes: as in all innovation, language users are to some extent constrained by their present idiolect; but they are also more likely to “overshoot the mark” in propagation-dependent innovation if they have strong social reasons to accommodate to the language user(s) with the idiolect(s) whose feature is being adopted.

However, conformity with the hearer’s idiolect is not a requirement in propagation. A speaker’s main goal may well be to achieve success in communicative situations (see Keller 1994 [1990]: 143), and “a successful innovation needs to be evaluated positively, either overtly or covertly” (Milroy and Milroy 1985: 368); social factors may thus override linguistic factors. Inertia and ability to communicate with speakers who have not gone through the change are also likely to exert influence on speaker choice (Denison 2003: 58), so a new feature would most likely need to confer social advantages on the speaker in order to be propagated.

To sum up, the present state of our knowledge does not allow us to state with any degree of certainty how large a part linguistic and extralinguistic factors play in propagation (see Blythe and Croft 2012: 273) and in propagation-dependent innovation, though it seems likely that a combination of the two is involved. However, the main argument I wish to make for the purposes of the present study is that extralinguistic factors are unlikely to play a part in independent innovation in grammar (and, probably, phonology).

This view makes it possible to refine our picture of language change in LModE. We should not necessarily expect sociocultural change to co-occur with categorical, or structural, change in grammar (unless such
changes are due to propagation from other languages or varieties – see Section 3.6); such change is predominantly due to independent innovation, which is not extralinguistically motivated. Changes in grammar through propagation and propagation-dependent innovation, in contrast, should multiply during periods of social upheaval that leads to the disruption of strong social networks and the formation of weak ones (see Section 2.3): changes in contexts of occurrence, functions, stylistic associations, and so on can all be expected to be frequent and to co-occur with frequency changes. This description appears to fit LModE well. There is clearly widespread propagation of changes among idiolects. In addition, propagation-dependent innovation occurs owing to imperfect replication in speaker contact. But neither propagation nor propagation-dependent innovation necessarily brings about the type of structural or categorical change whose rarity in LModE has been pointed out by scholars.

3.5 Propagation in Change from Above and in Change from Below

Labov (2001: 274, 279) makes an important distinction between change from above, which takes place at a high level of social consciousness, and change from below, in which idiolects are undergoing change below that level. In this section, I briefly consider one example each of these important types of language change in LModE, both of which predominantly involve propagation and contribute to the impression that there is little categorical change in the period: the development of urban dialects (3.5.1), which mainly comprises change from below, and standardization (3.5.2), which involves a great deal of change from above. These changes also mainly involve the propagation of existing features together with propagation-dependent innovation (for instance, hypercorrection by middle-class speakers aiming at standard usage). Language users affected by these changes were socially and/or geographically mobile and bound together by comparatively weak ties during the time when their idiolects went through the changes, which made comparatively rapid change possible despite social and geographical distance in some cases (Milroy and Milroy 1985: 370; see Sections 2.2–2.3).

3.5.1 Propagation from Below: Urban Dialects

An indirect result of the large-scale urbanization that took place in England in the LModE period (see Section 2.3.1) was that the distribution of dialects changed dramatically. England before the Industrial Revolution was
dialectally diversified to a high degree; for instance, Joyce (1991: 156) reports that at least twenty different dialects were in use in Lancashire, many of them associated with individual towns. As large numbers of speakers relocated to industrial centres and the metropolis, there was a great deal of concern that rural dialects were going to die out and that they needed to be recorded and catalogued before they disappeared (Beal 2010a: 2–3). Dixon (1997: 104) also argues that developments in transport and media after 1830 began to narrow the dialectal diversity of languages. The English Dialect Society, founded in 1873, and other scholarly efforts thus focussed on traditional rural dialects. However, at the same time, new, urban dialects emerged, and while these varieties did not attract the same interest among contemporary dialectologists, they represent one of the most important results of idiolectal change in LModE.

As the urbanization of the workforce between 1700 and 1900 was mainly regionally based (see Section 2.3.1), many of the new inhabitants in industrial centres had idiolects associated with related but distinct regional dialects. In such contexts, *levelling* typically takes place, whereby linguistic features that are more localized and/or less widespread than others tend not to be selected for inclusion in the emerging urban variety (Beal 2010a: 73). This process is an instantiation of the general tendency for communication between speakers to trigger mutual accommodation that causes idiolectal convergence (see Mufwene 2008: 15–16; in the case of urban varieties, the relevant changes frequently consisted in the non-use of a feature associated with one or several rural varieties in the surrounding area). The spread of urban varieties was facilitated by the network structure of the urban centres: network ties established between speakers who had recently relocated were (at least initially) weak compared with those previously forged in the countryside.

The typical result of these developments was a hybrid variety, as speakers selected features from the available feature pool and incorporated them – with some modification owing to propagation-dependent innovation – into their own idiolects (cf. Mufwene 2008: 117). Each idiolect was also a hybrid resulting from piecemeal acquisition, but the end result was widespread convergence on a number of features that together characterized the new urban variety, which contained a mixture of features from surrounding dialects (Joyce 1991: 156) but was linguistically different from all input varieties (Hickey 2003: 214). As a result, present-day urban varieties in England are recognized as distinct from the varieties used in surrounding areas, which would not have been the case before 1800, with the exception of Cockney (Beal 2010a: 6). However, post-levelling features
of the new urban variety may subsequently spread to smaller nearby urban centres, villages, and finally the countryside (Beal 2010a: 78).

There are a number of reasons why the emergence of urban dialects has not traditionally received widespread attention in studies of change in LModE. To begin with, they disrupted what was regarded as a clear “line of descent” from the regional dialects of Middle English to the rural dialects of LModE (Beal 2010a: 6), which meant that they were of less interest to early dialectologists. Nor did they typically fit neatly into accounts of the development of Received Pronunciation during this time (see Section 2.4.2). In terms of grammar, output from LModE urban varieties is comparatively rare in corpora, which limits the amount of scholarly attention paid to them in corpus studies.

Moreover, to some extent the new urban dialects were also “negatively defined” in that, compared with the varieties used in the surrounding countryside, their most salient characteristic may have been what features of those rural varieties did not become part of the urban variety. As a rule, levelling does not bring about the appearance of new linguistic features. This circumstance may have contributed to a sense that the new urban varieties were in fact nothing new. Although propagation-dependent innovation most likely occurred, the impression at the communal level is that little or no categorical change was involved: even the linguistic features from neighbouring rural varieties that died out in the urban variety still lived on in the communal language, provided that the rural varieties themselves continued to exist. Although the formation of LModE urban varieties involved changes to a very large number of idiolects, these developments have not significantly altered the image of LModE as a period of stability in the history of English. The magnitude of the change is severely downplayed in relation to the number of idiolects that underwent change.

3.5.2 Propagation from Above: Standardization

Although it is not easy to define a standard, a standard language is typically “a linguistic norm which a very large speech community overtly adheres to” (Smakman and Nekesa Barasa 2017: 23). Increasing adherence to such a shared norm has far-reaching consequences for the study of LModE.

By 1700, educated London English had, to a large extent, been selected as the variety that would form the basis for the standard (Beal 2010b: 22; Hickey 2010c: 15), but this variety had not yet been extensively codified, with the exception of printed orthography, where widespread uniformity had been reached (Auer 2012: 942). This lack of codification led to concern
about the neglect and decay of the language, which in turn was linked to “other forms of degeneration” (Auer 2012: 941). The Acts of Union 1707, which united England and Scotland, also contributed to the formation of an ideal of a single, stable form of English (Hickey 2010c: 9). The suppression of regional variation thus became an important goal (Hickey 2010c: 13; Beal 2010b: 32). While no English Academy was established to maintain the language, the eighteenth century, and especially its second half, is characterized by codification (Joyce 1991: 158; Auer 2012: 940–1), as evidenced by the publication of influential works such as Johnson (1755), Lowth (1762), and Walker (1791). This development was facilitated by what Lewis (2012: 902) refers to as “[t]he increased accessibility of print, and the generalization of the print culture”. By 1800, a written variety of English had been established which was “associated with the political, commercial, and academic centre of London” and “clearly distinct from colloquial or ordinary language usage” (Auer 2012: 941). While the main reason for proscribing pronunciation before 1750 had been deviation from the written word (Beal 2010b: 23), comments became increasingly judgemental in the second half of the century, when attempts at standardization were made (Auer 2012: 944), and a prestigious accent acquired social value and came to be “a prerequisite for social advancement” (Hickey 2010c: 15–16). Orality in writing was also increasingly disparaged among social aspirers during this time (Lewis 2012: 902).

The normative trend continued into the nineteenth century. Bailey (1996: 215) argues that “[a]ttitudes toward grammar . . . hardened into ideology”; Beal (2004: 116) notes the correlation between the emergence of the linguistically insecure lower middle class, whose members “needed accessible guides to help them avoid social embarrassment”, and the popularity of usage guides addressing grammar, word usage, and pronunciation. Print culture continued to spread to new sections of society, aided by technological advances in printing as well as tax cuts on newspapers and paper (see Section 4.5.2). The introduction of universal education with the Elementary Education Act 1870 helped to promulgate the perceived superiority of written Standard English, since regional linguistic features were discouraged by schoolteachers (Beal 2010a: 3). The emergence of Received Pronunciation as an elite accent in the nineteenth century (Beal 2010b: 21) further increased the social consequences of using a particular accent. Joyce (1991: 158) emphasizes the increased correlation between social class and dialect in the 1800s, and Lewis (2012: 902) argues that regional speech became strongly stigmatized during the same time.

The late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a veritable explosion of grammars, pronunciation dictionaries, usage guides, and so
on; for instance, while around 50 grammars were published in the period 1700–50, over 200 were put on the market during the following half-century (Beal 2004: 90). Such a prolific supply of course presupposes demand. As Auer (2012: 941) notes, the process of codification is linked to increased opportunities for social advancement in a money-based economy (see Section 2.3). People belonging to the middle classes became interested in grammars, usage guides, elocution lessons, etc. owing to the linguistic insecurity that characterizes socially mobile speakers (Labov 2001: 277–8; Beal 2004: 94, 168–9): instruction in linguistic matters was seen as necessary in order to benefit fully from opportunities to advance socially (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2014b: 147). Some of the supply of normative works that arose to meet this demand was also aimed at ordinary people for the first time (Wagner 2012: 916). This plethora of advice on linguistic behaviour is one aspect of the market for etiquette guides of various kinds that flourished in the period (Beal 2004: 179; Lewis 2012: 911), as linguistic behaviour was considered indicative of social propriety.

The middle classes were thus the main target for books promulgating standard usage; within this large group, the emerging lower middle class represented a target group for simpler guides that taught readers to avoid stigmatized usage (Beal 2004: 116, 179). A large number of books were also produced for women and children (Hickey 2010c: 7–8). The growing market for books for children tallies with the increased importance of the teaching of English in school during the LModE period (Beal 2004: 101–5). As regards books aimed at women, standards of propriety, including language, were arguably even stricter for women than for men, owing to the inequality of gender roles in the LModE period. Women were presented as guardians of manners and morals, and propriety in language was seen as indispensable in a wife – and in a mother, who was in a position to transfer her impeccable language to her offspring (Mugglestone 2003: 138–62). The lower classes had limited access to the standard owing to lack of education (Auer 2012: 940) and the financial means to purchase guides to standard usage (Hickey 2010c: 8). This class difference also means that the relationship between the speech used by the working classes and the types of writing typically preserved in corpora becomes increasingly problematic after the emergence of standardization and a literary culture (Durrell 2015: 16).

Bergs (2005: 54–5) argues that the establishment of a codified standard affected the overall result of language change mediated through weak ties. Before standard usage had been codified and become available to a significant proportion of the population, loose-knit networks mainly
promoted change that increased linguistic diversity. However, in the LModE period, members of loose-knit networks, which were characteristic above all of the middle classes, were easily influenced by pressure to conform to standard usage. Loose-knit networks thus instead came to facilitate the adoption of pre-existing usage norms by large numbers of speakers. We do not of course know to what extent such conformity spread to these language users’ informal conversation, but even if standard patterns were adopted more or less consciously and may mainly have been a feature of planned production, they must be part of the feature pool of a language user’s idiolect in order to be used at all.

As was the case regarding the formation of urban dialects, the number of idiolects that changed by adopting standardized patterns, largely through propagation, was very large. But because features that made up the target norm were already part of English as a communal language, there are few traces of this widespread idiolectal change in the overall structure of English. The feature pool of the communal language remained intact, since there were standard as well as non-standard users both before and after the relevant idiolects were affected by standardization; moreover, since most written – especially printed – documents were produced in Standard English already, there were few noticeable effects in the texts from the period. Like urban varieties, Standard English is also to some extent negatively defined, though in a slightly different way: while urban varieties can partly be described in terms of what features of the varieties used in the surrounding areas did not become part of the urban variety, the standard can be seen as what remains of the feature pool after features deemed unacceptable have been removed (Kretzschmar 2009: 18; Hickey 2010c: 16). The main differences between urban-variety formation and standardization are (i) that the emerging urban variety was to a greater extent a new variety and (ii) that standardization is, to a greater extent, a change from above. As the large market for normative works indicates, speakers are likely to be aware that there is an overtly prestigious variety to aim for, and while some changes in output as speakers approach standard usage may be due to a subconscious desire to emulate Standard English patterns, many of the idiolectal changes will have been aided or caused by conscious decisions to accommodate to standard usage.

Because the standard is an institutionalized construct, it may promote and demote variants in terms of their frequency compared with their incidence in the communal language as a whole (Kretzschmar 2015b: 102).
The brief account above is of course a simplification. Standard English is not a static entity but a moving target (Hickey 2012: 15–16). As shown in Section 2.4, some features that would not have been part of accepted usage around 1800 are now uncontroversial (e.g. the progressive passive or /ɑː/ in the bath set), and other features that were previously considered normal in educated usage are no longer current (e.g. be as perfect auxiliary or using /ɒ:/ in words like off). In addition, when a large number of people began to produce spoken and written output that approximated Standard English more closely than previously, the boundaries of what counted as standard output are likely to have been affected as a result. Indeed, colloquialization is due in part to this type of interchange, whereby features previously characteristic of informal speech became more frequent and/or acceptable in some types of writing (see Section 4.3.1 for fuller discussion). This process was doubtless assisted by the fact that speakers who adopted standard patterns did not typically lose the variety they had previously used; instead, their idiolects came to encompass a wider range of registers, with potential for interchange between them. However, standardization typically minimizes variation in form concerning language structure (Lange 2012: 995); as Milroy (1997: 313) notes, a standard variety is typically more uniform than any other variety of the language.

As mentioned above, the actual effects of normative statements on actual usage are debatable (see Auer 2012: 946–8). Curzan (2014: 24) defines standardizing prescriptivism as “rules/judgments that aim to promote and enforce standardization and ‘standard’ usage”; the codification of English is thus seen as belonging to one strand of prescriptivism. However, prescriptivism has often been regarded as a failure, largely because of its inability to stop language change (Curzan 2014: 2–3). Dekeyser (1975: 276) claims that, with regard to the number and case relations he surveyed, normative works had “no effect worth mentioning, if any at all” on nineteenth-century English; Bailey (1996: 260) argues that normative grammarians were “almost entirely unsuccessful” in their efforts to eradicate what they regarded as erroneous usage; and Anderwald (2016: 245) suggests that, as regards the grammar of the verb phrase, “both the

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15 As regards grammar, twentieth-century views on the codifiers of the 1700s often focussed on their prescriptive nature and their unwillingness to accept language change and social dimensions of usage. However, the twenty-first century witnessed a more nuanced attitude, in which grammarians like Lowth were partly re-evaluated (Beal 2004: 105–15); for instance, see Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2012: 46–8) for a discussion of Lowth (1762) from this perspective.

16 In a later work, Bailey (2010: 189) argues that the “explosive growth in the publication of grammar books had some influence” in the direction of increased uniformity of English in the 1800s, though he still gives more weight to migration patterns.
prescriptive nature and the prescriptive impact of nineteenth-century grammar writing on actual language change have been greatly overestimated”. Summarizing the findings of several studies, Percy (2012: 449–51) discusses a complex picture where natural standardization sometimes preceded proscription, which in turn makes some prescriptive comments seem more descriptive; nevertheless, some temporary influence can be traced to prescriptivist trends.

This type of reasoning is necessarily speculative, as it presupposes that we know what would have happened if standardization had not taken place and normative works had not been published (cf. Bailey 1996: 261). For example, the occurrence of proscribed usage such as *who* as an object relative marker in texts that are assumed to aim at standard usage may be taken as evidence of the failure of normative efforts, but we cannot know how frequent objective *who* would have been if there had been no normative works in the first place; as Hickey (2020: 57) points out, the survival of objective *whom* may itself be due in part to normative statements. There are suggestions in research that some normative statements did have an impact on usage; for instance, Sairio (2009: 213) suggests that normative works did play a part in the increased preference for pied piping over preposition stranding in her eighteenth-century material, and Auer and González-Díaz (2005) argue that a temporary revival of the subjunctive in adverbial clauses in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was influenced by this feature being recommended in normative works. Against this background, it seems likely that normative pronouncements did have some effect on the idiolects especially of socially mobile speakers, who also constituted a larger part of the population of England than ever before. In addition, what Percy (2012: 449) calls “‘natural’ standardization” doubtless had an impact on the language of many documents that have been included in corpora; for instance, as Percy notes, multiple negation began to disappear from educated usage before it was explicitly proscribed.

Neither standardization nor the publication of normative works could of course eradicate non-standard varieties; but those varieties are not predominant in the texts that have formed the basis for most corpora of LModE. Even though a great many language users who learnt the basics of the emerging standard variety between 1700 and 1900 doubtless preserved their native non-standard usage, their idiolects also came to include some ability to produce texts in Standard English – which means that those idiolects changed. (Many printed texts also went through an editing process that further enforced standardization.) The fact that Standard
English predominates in most corpora of LModE is both a problem for scholars who wish to paint a complete picture of the language of the period and an indication of the influence of standardization.

3.6 Summary and Discussion

I have demonstrated in this chapter that a large number of interacting factors create the impression that LModE is characterized by relative linguistic stability, because widespread change on the idiolectal level – the true measure of language change – remains largely invisible on the communal-language level. First, at least in grammar, the type of change facilitated by the weak links that characterized many LModE networks consists in the propagation of existing features, with concomitant propagation-dependent innovation resulting from imperfect replication. Weak links do not correlate with independent innovation, which is often responsible for most structural changes in the communal language. Examples of changes that affect a great many LModE idiolects but need not lead to the emergence of new features include the development of urban varieties and standardization. The combination of the dominance of texts influenced by standardization in the surviving evidence and the lack of access to colloquial speech makes LModE appear even more homogeneous compared with Early Modern and Present-Day English.

I will devote the rest of this section to discussing three issues which have not been addressed in this chapter, but which are important in order to connect my account of LModE to more general frameworks of language change. First, I shall discuss why LModE may feature comparatively little independent innovation compared with previous periods; then I will touch on scenarios where propagation may in fact correlate with structural change. The end of the section will be devoted to the issue of what speakers are responsible for language change.

The fact that LModE should feature a great deal of propagation does not entail that it should not also feature independent innovation, and my suggested explanations for the apparent rarity of independent innovation remain speculative. First, it is possible that language users may reach a “saturation point” with regard to how many changes their idiolects are likely to undergo simultaneously. If a large number of features are being propagated via weak network links at a given time, this may decrease an innovation’s likelihood of success. Features that are being propagated are likely to have a quantitative advantage over innovations in terms of which of them are selected for further propagation, because the former are used by
a larger number of speakers already, thus increasing both language users’ exposure to the new feature and the social advantages of adopting it. In this scenario, it is thus not necessarily the case that LModE features less innovation as such; rather, the innovations that do occur are less likely to be picked up and propagated because of competition with the large amount of propagation that is already taking place.

Another factor that may be influential is the scope of each speaker’s idiolect. Owing to advances in literacy, communications, etc. (see Section 2.3), a large number of LModE speakers were exposed to varieties other than those they were familiar with from growing up – including the standard variety. This situation would make it necessary for them to incorporate a wider range of registers into their idiolects than previously; Biber and Finegan’s (1997) analysis of the growing linguistic diversity of written English since the seventeenth century is a clear indication of this. Such demands on speakers may also set a limit on the acceptance of new innovations. This line of reasoning is mainly limited to written language – we know far less about register differences in speech – but writing is also our main source of evidence.

If we compare LModE to previous periods in the history of English, it becomes important to acknowledge an exception to the principle that weak links – and thus widespread propagation of linguistic features – do not correlate with the emergence of new features in a communal language: cases of language contact leading to widespread second-language learning, bilingualism, language shift, substratum influence, etc. in an area. In such a situation, intra-speaker propagation between idiolects belonging to speakers who are bilingual to a greater or lesser extent is likely to be a far more significant factor in language change than it was in LModE. Syntactic and phonological features will be involved (Filppula et al. 2008: 2), and propagation-dependent innovation will occur as features from the donor idiolect are being propagated: these features will be imperfectly replicated (which typically involves simplification) and/or adapted to the structure of the recipient idiolect. Since the idiolects that the propagated feature spreads between are mapped onto different communal languages, the change will be perceived as a structurally new feature emerging in the recipient language, which is otherwise associated mainly with independent innovation, even though propagation between two idiolects within the same speaker combined with propagation-dependent innovation is the actual source of the change.

This argument has potential repercussions for how we regard the earliest recorded stage of the English language, that is, Old English. It is usually implicitly assumed that most language users during the Old English period had idiolects whose output would have been structurally similar to what we see
in surviving texts. However, Trudgill (2010: 1–35) argues that most idiolects underwent many of the changes typically associated with the transition between Old and Middle English before the Middle English period; in Trudgill’s account, the Old English documents that have come down to us represent the learnt language of a literate, elite minority. If this argument is correct, in terms of grammar, most language users’ output during the Old English period was more similar to Middle English output (Tristram 2004: 106). In this scenario, language contact with Celtic – and possibly North Germanic – languages would have been an important factor in the early development of English (Trudgill 2010: 1–35; see also Milroy 1996 on a possible Anglo-Danish koiné). Language contact may thus help to explain why the transition between Old and Middle English appears to feature more structural change than, for instance, LModE. Most Old English idiolects would already have been similar in structure to Middle English owing to widespread propagation of features from Celtic (and later North Germanic) idiolects to Old English idiolects; this propagation would have involved considerable amounts of propagation-dependent innovation in the form of imperfect replication and simplification in the West Germanic varieties that ended up forming the basis for first-language idiolects in England. What happened in the transition from Old to Middle English was then mainly that speakers ceased to produce texts in classical Old English, not that their idiolects quickly underwent massive language change. While Trudgill’s (2010) theory is necessarily speculative, it matches the account of independent innovation, propagation, and propagation-dependent innovation sketched in this chapter.

If we consider only propagation and propagation-dependent innovation, the amount of change in a communal language may be due mainly to two parameters:

1. The number of idiolects that undergo propagation and propagation-dependent innovation (which in turn is related to factors such as the intensity of the contact and the strength of the network ties that exist in the community).
2. The degree of linguistic similarity of the idiolects belonging to the speakers who are in contact with one another.

The fact that people living in north-eastern England were exposed to contact with both Celtic and North Germanic speakers may help to explain why those dialects appear to be more advanced in the changes that characterize Middle English texts. There were of course regions that were characterized by language contact and shift to English between 1700 and 1900 (e.g. much of Ireland). But English already had a large native-speaker population and a near-standardized version by 1700, which would reduce the amount of structural change LModE underwent in this process.
Language change in a linguistically homogeneous community characterized by strong network ties would then be expected to be very limited, as the idiolects in contact are similar to begin with and the pressure to converge high. LModE would feature a great deal of change according to parameter (1), but the perceived effects on the communal language would be limited because the idiolects involved were comparatively similar, because most features of these idiolects had already been attested in linguistic research, and because the surviving LModE texts that have been subjected to analysis are heavily biased towards standard usage.

This situation is clearly different from the scenario outlined above, in which a large number of Celtic and Old Norse speakers shifted to English during the Old English period. Language shift to English (for instance, from Irish on Ireland and from a great many languages spoken by Native Americans, enslaved people, and migrants in the United States) of course occurred between 1700 and 1900 as well. The English idiolects of speakers who underwent such shifts were doubtless affected by those processes, and in some cases, the shift is very likely to have affected the resulting regional, social, ethnic, etc. variety of English. But the existence of an influential and relatively focussed Standard English variety in the LModE period, and the dominance of this variety in the preserved output, are likely to have constrained the long-term effects on surviving output in the communal language.

The amount of change that has taken place in English since 1700 is also a matter of perspective. If a variety like African American Vernacular English were granted the same importance in descriptions of the communal language as Standard English is, Present-Day English would arguably be considered to “have” copula deletion as a rare optional feature. For reasons that have little to do with linguistics, this is not usually the account given in descriptions of this particular communal language.

At this point, it may be argued that independent innovation is perhaps not a necessary mechanism for language change at all. If even far-reaching structural changes can be the indirect result of language contact, perhaps all language change can be reduced to propagation and propagation-dependent innovation? However, there are good grounds for assuming that independent innovation is a factor in language change. Most importantly, there are clear tendencies as regards what changes tend to take place in communal languages. Perhaps the best-known example is grammaticalization, where a very strong tendency towards unidirectionality has been found. Changes tend to be in the direction of more abstract, less specific meaning; for instance, future markers often develop from motion verbs (e.g. be going to in English or kommer att in Swedish), but the opposite
development is vanishingly rare (see, for instance, Hilpert and Correia Saavedra 2016: 357–8). Strong tendencies of that type become a great deal easier to explain if it is assumed (i) that speakers can produce independent linguistic innovations and (ii) that those innovations are constrained by linguistic factors.

Finally, the issues of who can innovate and where innovations are stored are matters of debate among linguists. In generativist approaches, it is often assumed that adult speakers’ language undergoes only peripheral changes (often referred to as changes in E-language), which may be unpredictable, “represent chance, contingent factors” (Lightfoot 2003: 120), or be due to migration, innovation, or sociocultural factors (Yang 2000: 237). Children exposed to input including such changes then reset rules to make their underlying system (their I-language) compatible with the input as a repair strategy (Bickerton 2014: 194; Potsma 2017: 76–7). Similarly, Newmeyer (2014: 44–5) suggests that new types of utterances in adult output may be stored outside adults’ grammatical competence proper and are only integrated into it by the next generation.

A number of potential problems with this framework have been pointed out. These problems include why there would be changes in adults’ E-languages without change in their I-languages (Westergaard 2017: 457), how such change would be directional if differences in the E-language input children receive are accidental (Croft 2000: 50), and how innovations would be propagated by children, who are not typically influential members of speech communities (Cournane 2017: 11), while members of the speech community old enough to be influential have typically stopped producing the novel constructions used during their language-acquisition process (Croft 2000: 48). Differences have also been argued to exist between the types of phenomena attested in language change and first-language acquisition (Croft 2000: 46–7); even when differences between children’s and adults’ first-language output seem parallel to language-change phenomena, the similarities have been argued to be attributable to “different processes and factors” (López-Couso 2017: 345). Widespread inter-person variation seems to exist in the process of first-language acquisition, where the Universal-Grammar model would predict homogeneous trajectories (López-Couso 2017: 340). Cournane (2017) constitutes a recent attempt to address some of these issues; Westergaard (2017) attempts to reconcile the abrupt changes predicted by theories of parameter resettings in first-language acquisition with the seemingly gradual nature of much attested language change. Nevertheless, a large number of linguists maintain that language change does take place
in adults’ idiolects; one source of such change is language contact between adults (Roberts and Sneller 2020: 197), which may be relevant mainly to propagation and propagation-dependent innovation.

It has been suggested that the groups which undergo language change may vary with the type of linguistic feature studied. Labov (1994: 84) argues that change in phonology and morphology is characterized by maintained frequencies in individual speakers and that the community’s language changes because speakers adopt increasingly advanced options, often in generational increments; in syntax and lexis, by contrast, all community members typically undergo the change together. However, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2017: 88, 97) argue that, at least as regards morphology, the expected stability of speakers does not appear from their studies, and that their results rather suggest differences among speakers as well as among instances of language change regarding generational vs. lifespan change. Raumolin-Brunberg (2005) identifies both generational difference and lifespan change in the shift from -(e)th to -(e)s in the third person present singular indicative. Nahkola and Saanilahti (2004) suggest that idiolects are unlikely to undergo change with regard to features that are acquired as categorical, while lifespan changes are likely when what is acquired is rather a variant field with true competition between variants. Petré and Van de Velde (2018) also find evidence of both types of change in their analysis of the be going to future expression: speakers with an entrenched representation of going as a lexical verb were unable to fully adopt new patterns, but conversely, speakers who have fully grammaticalized the construction were limited in what they could communicate successfully by what uses were conventionalized in their speech communities, so that “actual linguistic behavior is a trade-off between entrenched cognitive schemas and social accommodation” (Petré and Van de Velde 2018: 890–1).

Another distinction argued to be relevant is whether the motivation for the change is linguistic or extralinguistic. Hickey (2020: 45) suggests that internally motivated and externally motivated change may be linked mainly to childhood and adulthood, respectively, although language-shift scenarios can involve internally motivated change for adults as well. Sankoff (2013: 274) argues that there is evidence for “grammatical malleability” in adolescents and young adults, while adulthood is mainly characterized by stability and more or less conscious changes towards a community-based, supra-local, or standard norm. (The role assigned to linguistic and extralinguistic factors in language change in my framework was discussed in detail in Section 3.4.)

The mechanism of change itself may also constrain what can be propagated. Labov (2010: 311) argues that abstract structural patterns
such as rules and constraints are less likely to be affected by propagation across speech communities, as the contact that enables propagation takes place mainly between adults, who do not acquire the abstract features as easily and accurately as children do. However, as Labov (2007: 347) acknowledges, the dichotomy between changes that are due to transmission (acquisition of a first language by a child) and diffusion (contact between – mainly adult – members of different speech communities) is to some extent an idealization, as most speech communities are not homogeneous entities with clear boundaries.

In sum, there is no clear consensus regarding whether transmission or diffusion is the more important mechanism in language change or whether all changes take place via the same mechanism. In principle, the framework outlined in this chapter is compatible with a scenario where features that are innovated or propagated are stored peripherally by adults and are fully integrated into idiolects only by the next generation’s children when they are exposed to output containing the new features (see Blythe and Croft 2012: 277). However, my assumption is that change does occur in adults’ idiolects (for similar views, see Denison 2003: 61; Bergs 2005: 264; Beckner et al. 2009: 14; Traugott and Trousdale 2013: 21). The changes examined in Chapters 5–8 all result in frequency shifts in patterns that were already available to most speakers; such changes may be especially easy to undergo as an adult, because little structural modification of the idiolect is required. Colloquialization and densification are assumed to occur mainly through the propagation of changes in genre norms through adult output. However, it is also possible that some of the change is due to generational transmission, as part of a more general tendency in English as a whole. As shown in Chapter 7, some of the increase in nominal premodifiers appears to be more general in my material, and not restricted to informational language. Similarly, Leech et al. (2009: 219n22, 234–5) note that late-twentieth-century speech may be following a trend set by writing in this regard.

The case studies in Chapters 5–8 all employ a corpus-linguistic perspective on propagation and propagation-dependent innovation. This choice of methodology may seem unexpected, given that corpus linguistics does not typically focus on the idiolectal level, which has been foregrounded in this chapter. I will therefore devote part of Chapter 4 to demonstrating why a corpus-linguistic framework can provide us with important insights into language change.