

Are we surprised yet? Expecting the unexpected in Asia-Pacific language variation

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Abstract

This conference series, *New Ways of Analyzing Variation-Asia/Pacific* (NWAV-AP) was inaugurated 14 years ago at the University of Delhi, India, with the goal of bringing variationist research attention to Asia-Pacific languages and making discoveries in understudied communities. At that 2011 conference, William Labov presented a plenary talk titled “The discovery of the unexpected,” which was published in 2015 as the first article in the inaugural issue of the journal *Asia-Pacific Language Variation* (APLV). As we now participate in the 8th meeting of NWAV-AP since 2011, and as we celebrate the 10th anniversary of APLV, it seems fitting to ask how far we have come in our goals. What have we found? Are we discovering the unexpected?

During the first NWAV-AP conference, Labov advised us to prepare for “unexpected findings” as we explore non-Western languages in this region: “the investigation should be prepared for unexpected findings that respond to the wider range of social relations” (Labov 2015:21). In addition to the wider range of social structures, we also anticipated that the wider range of linguistic structures -- such as tonal languages -- would contribute new variationist perspectives as well. Thus, we anticipated gaining many important new perspectives by studying variation in lesser-studied language communities (Nagy & Meyerhoff 2008; Stanford & Preston 2009; Satyanath 2015; Smakman & Heinrich 2015; Stanford 2016; Meyerhoff 2017; Adli & Guy 2020; and others). In fact, we predicted research *surprises*, as these communities “will pose theoretical challenges for existing principles, along with surprising new insights and new research questions to explore” (Mansfield & Stanford 2017:117).

Are we surprised yet? Using data from selected studies in this region, this talk aims to stimulate a scholarly conversation about how our results from Asia-Pacific language communities may compare with expectations based on traditional sociolinguistic principles. The talk begins with the author’s research observations, drawing from Polynesian languages in the Cook Islands, Tai-Kadai languages in south China, and Tibeto-Burman languages in southwest China, and then examines other work around the Asia-Pacific region in search of surprising, unexpected, new knowledge in variationist sociolinguistics.

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Keywords

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