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# “It’s Not That Big (Of) a Deal”: The Sociolinguistic Conditioning of Inverted Degree Phrases in Washington, DC

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the significance of participant assigned acceptability ratings for the post-adjectival degree construction *ADJ (of/0) NP*. The majority of studies in sociolinguistic variation have investigated phonological variables, such as alveolarization of (ing) and reduction or deletion of (t/d). Studies on syntactic variation often examine multiple realizations of a variable or the distribution of several variables. However, we base our study on Rickford et al.’s (1995) finding that syntactic variables can also be successfully isolated. In the present study, we describe a current change in progress involving a previously unstudied syntactic variable: post-adjectival (of) in degree constructions such as “It’s not that big (of) a deal.” We analyzed 3,600 tokens collected from 150 participants in the Washington, DC, area, and found significance in participant age, participant ethnicity, and the linguistic conditioning of the phrase, all affecting the acceptability rating given to the construction. Most notably, we found that acceptability of (of) is negatively correlated with age. The younger participants showed a strong preference for constructions with (of), whereas older informants overall preferred (0) constructions. Our findings suggest that this feature is part of an ongoing change in progress in Washington, DC.

# “It’s Not That Big (Of) a Deal”: The Sociolinguistic Conditioning of Inverted Degree Phrases in Washington, DC

Anastasia Nylund and Corinne Seals\*

## 1 Introduction

Syntactic variation is an area of sociolinguistics that still has much room to expand. As such, one variable that has not been formally examined until now is the presence or absence of the preposition *of* in the inverted degree construction “ADJ (of) a/n NP” (such as *big of a deal*).

This study aims to show that both linguistic and social factors govern the extent to which speakers find *of* acceptable in the above inverted degree construction and those like it, findings which consequently shed light on its participation in the orderly heterogeneity (Weinreich et al. 1968) that underpins language variation and change. The variable may initially appear to pattern randomly—the presence or absence of *of* does not affect the propositional meaning of the construction, and impressionistically it does not appear to be a recognizable feature of any regional or social dialect. However, recalling Labov’s definition of sociolinguistic variables as “[different] ways of saying the same thing” (Labov 1972:323), we aim to show that (of) is subject to social patterning in similar ways to more frequently studied variables. Significantly, we find evidence for a change in progress, a conditioning interaction between age and ethnoracial affiliation, as well as a phonological factor governing the realization of the syntactic variable (of).

### 1.1 Background

To situate this study, we began with examining relevant syntactic and phonological variation studies. Most notably, Rickford et al. (1995) examine the syntactic variability of the presence or absence of the verbs *be concerned* or *go* in constructions involving *as far as*. During this study, the authors find that they are able to successfully apply the methods used in the popular phonological variationist studies to their binary analysis of the syntactic variable in question (Rickford et al. 1995:128). The success of the above-mentioned study makes available the reapplication of similar methodology to new syntactic variables, such as the post-adjectival degree construction considered here.

In examining the ADJ (of) NP construction, we were interested in the social and linguistic constraints governing the selection of (of). Due to our initial observations mentioned above, we hypothesized that there is a possible change in progress, meaning that younger speakers would be more likely to positively judge constructions involving the use of *of*. For this reason, we hypothesized that age would turn out to be the most salient social factor in our consideration of the distribution of (of). Linguistically, we wanted to see if the length of the adjectives had an effect on the selection of (of).

## 2 Inverted Degree Constructions

The structure under investigation, “ADJ (of/Ø) DP,” is exemplified by the difference between “It’s not that big of a deal” and “It’s not that big Ø a deal.” The inverted degree phrase has been structurally described by syntacticians, including Kennedy and Merchant (2000) and Borroff (2006), as an inversion from the more canonical QP of the type “[It’s not] a big deal.” In particular, it is worth noting that the phrase occurs in the scope of negation.

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## 2.1 Syntactic Structure

The following syntactic structure has been proposed for phrases of this type:

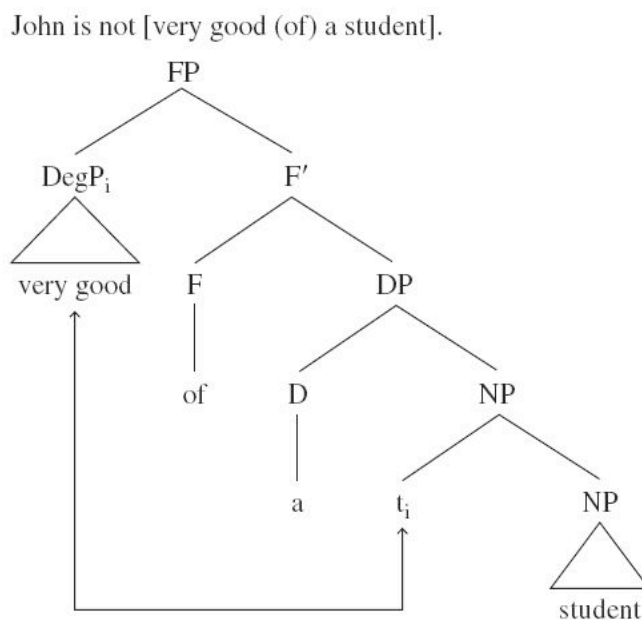


Figure 1: Structure of negative inverted degree phrases (reproduced from Borroff 2006:519, following Kennedy and Merchant 2000).

On this analysis, the inversion happens as follows: The DegP “very good” is base generated in Spec,NP position, as “very good student,” but is moved up to Spec,FP position, leaving a trace in its place. According to Borroff (2006), the movement allows for the head of FP to alternate between a null variant and an overt variant, in the form of the sociolinguistic variable (of). Because the two structures are syntactically the same, we can presume that the conditioning of the variable is not due to preference for one structure over another. This motivates the sociolinguistic study of the variable.

## 3 Language and Communication In the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area

The present study was conducted within the framework of the ongoing Language and Communication in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area (henceforth LCDC) project. LCDC is maintained by faculty and students at the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University. Providing a data-driven platform for sophisticated sociolinguistic investigations of Washington, DC, the project aims to explore and describe how residents of the diverse DC area use language as part of the everyday showcasing, shaping, and reflecting upon their own locally salient, shifting and enduring identities.

Researchers such as Fasold (1972) and Wolfram (1984) commented decades ago on Washington, DC, as an interesting sociolinguistic area of the United States. Wolfram (1984) points out that the linguistic landscape of DC is diverse and difficult to classify. Historically, Washington, DC, represents the intersection of North and South, but contemporary DC is home to a number of locally salient and iconically dichotomous characterizations of the area. Washington is by turns seen as an official government town and a center of local Black history, “revitalizing” and “gentrifying,” wealthy and poor, and so on.

The LCDC project aims to understand how the residents of the DC area situate themselves and construct their own identities within this diverse and not unproblematic linguistic and social landscape. A number of studies have utilized the LCDC data to investigate many diverse issues

relating to language and facets of identity. Studies have looked at the status and indexicality of stable sociolinguistic variables in the area, including real- and apparent-time changes in the monophthongization of (ay) among DC residents (Jamsu et al. 2009) and the connection between (-t/d) deletion and attitudes toward gentrification in DC (Podesva 2008). Schiffrin (2009) examines the emergent nature of local history and personal identity in her work on oral histories of a poor African American neighborhood in the 1960s. Damari (2009) situates her work on stance and identity in the discourse of a bi-cultural couple in the DC area.

#### 4 Data and Methodology

The present study is the first survey study within the LCDC framework, and, to the authors' knowledge, the first investigation of the social and linguistic conditioning of the variable. Initially, our interest in the variable was sparked through informal inquiry among peers, which revealed that awareness of, and metalinguistic discourse about, the variable was plentiful. Disagreements within single communities of practice regarding the acceptability of the inverted degree phrase variants prompted us to use a survey methodology eliciting acceptability ratings from DC residents.

Two surveys were distributed to 150 randomly chosen participants in and around Washington, DC. Each survey consisted of 26 sample sentences, all of the type "It's not that ADJ (of/Ø) a/n NP". All NPs in the sentences were kept monosyllabic. For each sentence, both a null and overt head version was constructed. These were split between the two surveys to ensure no overlapping or duplicate stimuli. Participants were asked to rate the acceptability of these 26 sentences, on a six-point scale, in response to the prompt question "Would you say this?" (with 6="yes," 3-4="sometimes," and 1="no"). Some example sentences included: "It's not that useful a tool"; "It's not that good of a deal"; "It's not that minimal a loss."

The survey design aimed to control for several social and linguistic factors. Social factors, which participants were asked to self-report in conjunction with completing the survey, were participant age, sex, ethnoracial affiliation, childhood residence, present residence, and years spent in the Washington, DC, area. Linguistic factors controlled for included realization of FP head (of/Ø), syllable structure of the adjective (mono-, bi-, and trisyllabic adjectives were included) and positive/negative connotation of the adjective (e.g. "good/bad," "useful/useless," etc).

In total, 3,600 tokens were submitted to a regression analysis using the JMP 8 statistical package. We tested primarily for effects of each of the social and linguistic factors on the acceptability ratings, as well as testing for any interactions between any of the social factors (sex, age, and ethnoracial affiliation). The results are presented in Section 5. Section 5.3 also details and discusses the results of a small corpus study, carried out following the survey study, which aimed to further test the interaction between realization of the FP head and the syllable structure of adjectives and NPs.

#### 5 Results

The set of results to be considered here comes from responses to the question "Would you say this?" where the participant had a six-point rating scale. In this paper, we report on age, ethnicity, and linguistic conditioning, all of which were found significant with  $p < 0.0001$ .

##### 5.1 Age

Figure 2 shows an inverse relationship between age and use of (of) constructions. The diachronic variation represented here shows age having a negative correlation with individual preference for *of* constructions. Figure 2 shows the results in relation to (of) on the left and to Ø on the right.

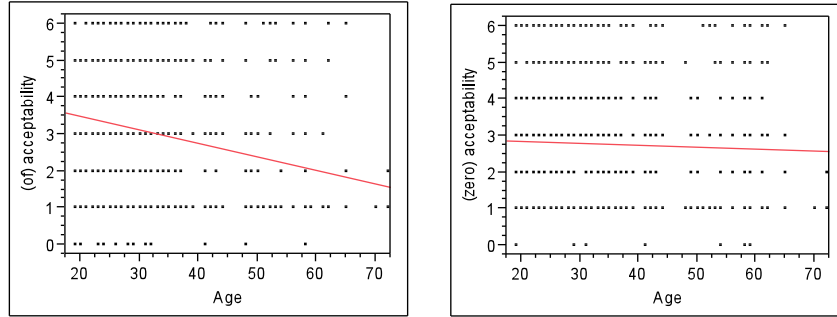


Figure 2: Negative correlation between age and (of) acceptability.

Younger participants have a strong preference for (of) constructions, whereas older informants overall preferred  $\emptyset$  constructions.  $\emptyset$  constructions were overall similarly rated. This finding suggests that the (of) variable is undergoing a change in progress, with *under-33.5* and *over-33.5* being the statistically relevant age categories, and younger speakers leading the change.

**5.2 Ethnoracial Affiliation**

(Of): Ethno.	Least Sq. Mean	St. Error	(Of): Ethno.	Least Sq. Mean	St. Error
No: O	1.0964	0.5156	Yes: LA	3.0751	0.2155
No: AA	1.7189	0.1977	Yes: AA	3.0713	0.2025
No: B	2.0866	0.2498	Yes: EA	3.0652	0.0621
No: AP	2.1702	0.2485	Yes: O	2.1748	0.5560
No: LA	2.3430	0.2217	Yes: B	2.1017	0.2459
No: EA	3.0079	0.0627	Yes: AP	2.0391	0.2373

Table 1: Statistical means of ethnicity in choosing constructions with (of).

When (of) is not present, the construction is favored most by European Americans (3.007). The construction is disfavored least by Latinos (2.343), followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders (2.170), Biracial participants (2.086), and most disfavored by African Americans (1.718). When (of) is present, the construction is favored most by Latinos (3.075), followed by African Americans (3.071), and European Americans (3.065), and disfavored by Biracial participants (2.101) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (2.039).

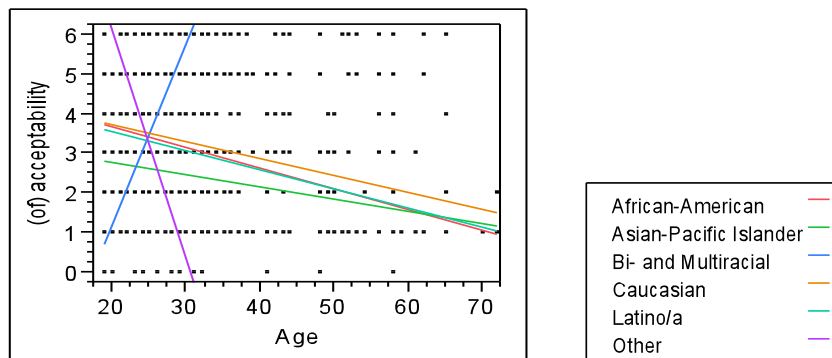


Figure 3: (of) acceptability: Crossing ethnoracial affiliation and age.

After seeing the significant results for both age and ethnicity when crossed with (of), we wanted to see how ethnicity has an effect on age and the change in progress. To this end, a regres-

sion was run crossing age and ethnicity for (of) constructions. As Figure 3 shows, the interaction between age and ethnoracial affiliation overall confirms that the variable is undergoing a change in progress. Biracial participants and those who self-identified as “Other” display patterns incongruous with the general trends. This is likely due to a much smaller sample among these categories (two and one participant, respectively), and an overwhelmingly young sample at that.

The African American participants show the strongest preference for (of) constructions and the strongest dispreference for  $\emptyset$  constructions, differing by 1.353. This pattern may indicate that overtly headed inverted degree constructions are a more salient feature to African American speakers in Washington, DC, than to speakers of other ethnoracial affiliations. Latinos also show a large difference, as their preference for (of) has a difference of .732 over  $\emptyset$ . Additionally, both African American and Hispanic participants under 33.5 significantly favored (of) constructions compared to older speakers of their own ethnic group, confirming a change in progress.

### 5.3 Syllable Structure

The syllable structure of the preceding adjective interacted significantly ( $p < .0001$ ) with the acceptability ratings of the survey stimuli. In particular, (of) constructions in which the adjective was a monosyllabic one (e.g. “It’s not that big of a deal”) were overall rated higher than those with multisyllabic adjectives (e.g. “It’s not that useful of a tool”).

An additional analysis was performed to more clearly see what role the syllabic structure of the adjective played in the construction. We performed a small corpus-based study using the Open American National Corpus (OANC) (American National Corpus 2009). The OANC comprises 14.5 million words and represents a subsample of the second release of the American National Corpus (ANC), arranged by genre. The corpus is divided into “written” (e.g. scholarly/magazine articles) and “spoken” (telephone and switchboard conversation) genres. A search was performed with a regular expression, targeting strings of the type “ADJ (of) a/n NP” and using the Penn Treebank POS tag set. Of the full corpus, 40 tokens of the target structure were retrieved. 38 of these were retrieved from the “spoken” subcorpus. Out of 18 hits in which the NP was monosyllabic, 15 hits contain both a monosyllabic adjective and a monosyllabic NP. In addition, the majority of hits were ones with monosyllabic adjectives (29/38) and monosyllabic NPs (18/38).

Both the findings from the survey and corpus studies suggest an interaction between the syllable structures of the adjective and NP in inverted degree constructions. This interaction can be described as a preference for the adjective and NP matching in those inverted degree phrases where the FP head (of) is realized. One possible explanation for these findings is that the syntactic variable is subject to phonological conditioning, namely the preference for binary syllabic feet. Table 2 shows the syllabic structure of the iconic phrase, “It’s not that big of a deal”.

Feet	$\sigma$		$\sigma$	
Syllable	[Stressed	Unstressed]	[Unstressed	Stressed]
Structure	big	of	a	deal

Table 2: The syllable/foot structure for “big (of) a deal”.

The functional head (of) effectively inserts into the surface structure an extra unstressed syllable which contributes to making the structure symmetrical and binary in terms of syllabic feet. While a much closer investigation (with larger total Ns to provide a more robust quantitative base) may find that foot binarity is only part of the conditioning of the variable, this finding nevertheless indicates that this syntactic variable is, at least in part, conditioned by a phonological factor.

## 6 Discussion

The above findings provide evidence that (of) is undergoing a change in progress, with younger speakers leading the change. In addition, we found that (of) is seen as most acceptable when co-varying with monosyllabic adjectives. Recalling Guy’s (1996) finding that deletion of final coronal stops (*t/d-deletion*) is more frequent in environments where they are not grammatically sali-

ent (i.e. in underived environments rather than where the coronal stop is a tense-marker), it is possible that the linguistic conditioning of (of) lies on the interface between syntax and phonology: *of* may be conditioned by a preference for binary syllabic feet. The use of *of* is seen as most acceptable in the following environment: [ $\sigma$  (ADJ)  $\sigma$  (of)  $\sigma$  (indefinite article)  $\sigma$  (NP)]. The unstressed syllable provided by an overt realization of the FP head *of* constructs or maintains two binary feet, whereas a null head would result in a foot asymmetry.

A particularly interesting finding is the interaction between age and ethnoracial affiliation. While the results detailed in Figure 3, especially in regards to the Latino, African American, and European American trends, may seem somewhat surprising at first, Fought (1999) points out when discussing Latinos that such split agreement is not surprising, as other studies have shown similar trends:

Younger speakers, and particularly those whose networks included more contacts with Anglos, tended to use the AAVE variants of these features less frequently. The findings of both of these studies fit well with the principles of accommodation theory (as presented for example in Giles and St. Clair 1979, since those who had more contact with speakers of other ethnicities were most likely to assimilate linguistic variables or patterns from external dialects. (Fought 1999:6)

This explanation certainly fits with current patterns of assimilation in the United States. Several decades ago, Latinos were much less assimilated into the majority culture of the United States than they are now. As assimilation in culture has increased, so has language use, driven by ideologies of standardness in institutions such as schools. So, whereas Latinos may have previously identified with other minority groups, the younger generations may progressively use more standard variants as a sign of accommodation to and identification with the predominantly White majority.

Fought further supports this in noting that "...one hypothesis might be that Latino and African American communities differ: in other words, Latino speakers participate in some of the changes from the matrix Anglo community while African Americans do not," (Fought 2006:7). So, while African Americans and European Americans trend similarly with regards to, for example, age, the two never actually meet, and the *of* patterns of variation remain different.

The most significant social factor in the distribution of (of) is age, showing that the variable is likely undergoing a change in progress. Speakers under 35 are the leaders in this change, with speakers around 20 showing the strongest preference for the variable. One prominent variable which originated in young speakers is quotative *be + like*. Work on the variable (e.g. Romaine and Lange 1991, Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2004) notes that the feature originated in the speech of teenagers. While studies have shown that *be + like* is still largely perceived to be a teenage feature, as shown in Dailey-O'Cain's (2000) matched-guise study, it is also noteworthy that evidence has shown a diffusion over time (Ferrara and Bell 1995). *Be + like* may have started as a teenage feature, but the age bias is receding as the feature is diffused into other age groups and becomes more grammaticalized in its own right. It may be the case that the change in progress that (of) is undergoing may lead to an age diffusion akin to that of the quotative. One indicator of this is the relatively positive attitudes towards (of) shown by the participants in our study - recall that overall, (of) constructions were rated slightly higher on acceptability than  $\emptyset$  constructions, suggesting that speakers' intuitions about (of) are positive.

Overall, this study has important implications for understanding patterns of variation in communities. The change in progress of this variable in addition to the evidenced ethnoracial conditioning informs our understanding of patterns of variation in Washington, DC. The Washington, DC, community is grossly understudied, and the complexity of our results shows the richness of the DC speech community.

Some limitations to this study necessitate further investigation. While the sample of participants was fairly diverse in terms of age, more balanced ethnoracial sampling is desired, as over 75% of participants self-identified as European American. Additionally, social class was not polled, and is desirable for further analysis as well.

Production studies may also help determine the linguistic and social conditioning of (of).



Naturalistic data will need to be examined to capture what a survey study cannot—any phonological and contextual factors which can help more clearly determine the conditioning of (of) are invisible in an acceptability rating study, but the survey is of course a first step towards a more holistic picture of (of). Corpus-based studies may show the historical development of (of)—our finding that (of) is most favored where it facilitates the binarity of syllabic feet gives us some indication that it may have originated from a construction such as the one we used to exemplify the feature, “It’s not that big of a deal.”

## 7 Conclusion

This study was motivated by the observation by the authors, our fellow linguists and non-linguists alike, that people around us appeared to have different intuitions about the “correctness” and appropriateness of a feature that, to our knowledge, had not been examined by sociolinguists. We were excited to investigate the feature, which in informal polling had not shown any indication of patterning geographically in our cohort. The discovery of an interaction between age and ethnoracial affiliation as predictors for (of) acceptability may indicate that the feature is a local change, currently in progress, or that the change is supralocal, perhaps supraregional, and again driven by younger speakers. It will be especially interesting to see what future studies discover with respect to ethnoracial affiliation. As far as the linguistic conditioning is concerned, the investigation of this variable has shown the phonological conditioning of a syntactic variable, highlighting how variation operates on the syntax-phonology interface.

We were surprised, and delighted, to find such robust evidence of social and linguistic conditioning of the variable. In particular, we believe that this investigation has shown that less grammatically salient variables like (of) are part of language users’ scope of awareness. In this way, our study contributes to the growing body of literature on language awareness and attitudes, and illustrates the usefulness of survey methodology in determining the salience of variables.

As sociolinguists working in Washington, DC, we were particularly excited to carry out the first systematic investigation of the variable in DC. Washington, DC, is a fascinating sociolinguistic environment, and one which has hitherto been chronically understudied. This study contributes to our continuing endeavor toward a better understanding of language variation and change in DC, particularly as it exists today, marked by social and demographic changes, as well as ideological forces. Finding a change in progress, in which young speakers act as leaders, was especially thrilling, and we hope that investigations of this variable in other speech communities allow for a yet richer picture of variation and change in the United States and beyond.

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