It is generally agreed that innovations arise in relatively homogeneous speech communities via two routes: from above, and more commonly, from below (Labov 1966). It is also generally agreed that these are distinct phenomena. The former is adaptive, explicable with reference to factors external to the linguistic system, while the latter is evolutive, explicable with reference to the linguistic system that gave it rise (Andersen 1973:778). In more recent formulations, adaptive change can be viewed as a contact phenomenon, entailing diffusion, while evolutive change involves transmission and follows patterns of incrementation (Labov 2007). While the point of origin and pathway of spread of these types of change have received systematic scrutiny, the outcomes of these varying modes of change remain relatively unexplored in sociolinguistic research to date, particularly their vernacular consequences ‘on the ground’.

In this paper, we focus on three historical changes from above in English: the rise of the *wh*–relative pronouns, the *of* genitive, and the use of *more* for comparison, as in (1).

(1) The woman *who* is the mother *of* the energetic boy is *more* busy these days.

Each variable exhibits systematic variation in written English (historical and contemporary), with a complex suite of constraint effects (e.g. Ball 1996; Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi 2007; Mondorf 2009). However, the building evidence from studies of vernacular speech reveals an antithetic picture. While variation is apparent, deeper analysis reveals distinct patterns of variability that distinguish the nature of the change.

Despite claims of systemic variation in the English relative pronouns, the *wh*– forms are actually rare in spoken language, consistent with Romaine (1982:212). Analysis of 3220 restrictive relative clauses in Canadian English confirms that *who* is highly circumscribed to human antecedents of subject relatives and with defining social correlates (D’Arcy & Tagliamonte 2010). Similarly, although the overall distribution of genitive variants suggests robust variability (47% ‘s; 53% *of*; total N = 1421), detailed contextual analysis reveals that these variants do not productively alternate but are highly partitioned by possessum animacy (Tagliamonte & Jankowski 2011). Moreover, the same type of divide typifies adjective comparison: Analysis of 1400 tokens of New Zealand English and 4300 tokens of Canadian English reveals variation overall (e.g. NZ 32% *more/most*, 68% –*er/*–*est*; CDA 19% *more/most*, 81% –*er/*–*est*), but when lexical items are considered, individual adjectives are (near) invariant with respect to one variant or the other.

A synthetic perspective across all three variables suggests that there are distinct pathways of development for different registers. In written language, changes from above —which enter the language via more formal styles and are enshrined in standard language ideologies— may develop the familiar structured heterogeneity we expect of (socio)linguistic variation. In the vernacular, however, variants that enter the community grammar through varying contact with prestige varieties (e.g. French and Latin in Middle English as in the cases here), appear to develop a highly delineated pattern. We discuss the ramifications of these distinctive results for interpreting variation analysis.