Sociolinguistics as Language Variation and Change is just over 40 years old making it a relatively new discipline and one that has undergone a virtual revolution in the course of its short history — from inception to full blown development. Over the course of this history it has had its share of debates, rebellions, advances and setbacks. In this paper, I offer an analysis of a common and extensively studied linguistic variable — stative possession in English, (1), as a focal point to reflect on the state of the art in Language Variation and Change

(1) a. He’s got bad breath; he has smelly feet. (Christy Biggs, age 33, England, 1997)

b. In the winter we got all kinds of rinks around. I got one in my backyard in the winter. My buddies have theirs in their backyard. (Donald Donovan, age 18, Canada, 2011)

The construction with have has the deepest history. Earlier in time and in some dialects more than others, have/has contracted, e.g. I’ve a cat, leading to got being added in the late 16th century producing the composite form ‘have got’ (often rendered as ve’s got). Later on the contraction elided leaving got alone, e.g. I got a cat. All these variants persist in contemporary English dialects providing a quintessential case of ‘layering’ of older and more recently evolved forms (Hopper 1991:23). More interestingly, the forms have not been neutral in social meaning. Use of have got for possession was condemned in the 1700’s and 1800’s, then championed in the 1900’s, while got alone has remained universally stigmatized especially in 3rd person singular, and often attributed education, class and/or ethnic connotations. Thus, this common linguistic variable comprises quintessential attributes for scrutiny: historical variegated development, multiple synchronic forms, dialectal differentiation and social situated meaning.

The data I will examine, which come from long-term, cross-project, multi-dialectal studies, show that two major varieties of English (British vs. North American) exhibit antithetic trajectories of change. Yet some of the linguistic constraints on this variable remain steadfast over centuries and across oceans (have got is favoured with concrete complements, e.g. I’ve got a cat); others differ depending on region (have favoured for noun phrase subjects, e.g. Cats have nine lives). However, a key variant of this system is got alone, which not only embodies the linguistic evolution of the system (favoured in particular linguistic contexts, e.g. 1st person, concrete) but also indexes emblematic identities (e.g. Got no Cum blood in me!). A ‘language variation and change’ perspective of these results offers a unified interpretation of how social meaning arises out of morpho-syntactic linguistic change.