

13 Child Language Variation

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Child language variation is a relatively new concentration within the field of sociolinguistics. To be sure, children have been included from time to time in studies of variation, beginning with Fischer's groundbreaking examination of (ing) variation among school children in 1958. However, the focus of this work has not been on children before adolescence for both theoretical as well as methodological reasons. The purpose of this chapter will be to review briefly the work leading up to the more recent interest in child language variation, to discuss the possible reasons for the relative neglect of this age group historically, and to examine recent work concentrating on the acquisition of variable features by young children and possible directions for future research.

1 History of Child Language Variation

There are a number of reasons why the early work on language variation and change did not focus on the speech of young children. For one, the field itself is only approximately 40 years old. It appears reasonable in a new field of linguistic study, particularly one building on that of dialectology – a notably adult-focused discipline – that data would be collected first on speakers who were thought to control the particular dialect in question and its variations. Children, on the other hand, were seen primarily as “acquirers” of the vernacular of a speech community, not necessarily as contributors to its maintenance and change. Indeed, Labov (1964) noted that although dialect features are learned during childhood, it is during adolescence that socially significant variation is demonstrated. In addition, with his early work (1963, 1966, for example), Labov initiated the study of language variation and change, including using synchronic data to illuminate past linguistic patterns and changes as well as to predict future change. This practice depends crucially on the assumption that dialect patterns, once attained in adulthood, do not change significantly

throughout the life span. Although this assumption continues to be debated within the literature, it is the source of much synchronic work and encourages a focus on the speech of adults, since that of children acquiring a linguistic system would not, in principle, be useful in the study of historical processes.

In addition to adult-focused research, explorations of the speech of adolescents have also been extremely fruitful. The evidence for the robustness of the adolescent peer-group-created vernacular is abundant and will not be disputed in this chapter. Rather, it is suggested that the adolescent does not emerge, dialect intact, from a vacuum (Roberts 1999, Eckert 2000). The foundations for adolescent, and adult, speech patterns are laid down in childhood, during the early language acquisition process, and it would appear useful to look to the dialects of children for answers to some of the questions of linguistic variation and change.

As noted above, some very early variationist work did include children as participants. Most notably, Fischer (1958) found social variation in children, aged 3 to 10, and stylistic variation in a 10-year-old boy. However, he did not separate the children by age in his analysis, so it is impossible to state whether or not the youngest children in his study shared the pattern documented in his overall results.

Others examined variation in young speakers as well, but most frequently concentrated on school age, rather than preschool, children. For example, Romaine (1978) continued the exploration of social and stylistic variation in children by looking at the production of word final /r/ in Scottish English by 6-, 8-, and 10-year-old children and found gender, age, and style variation. Her conclusions were noteworthy not only because they documented the acquisition of social variation in young speakers, but also because she concluded they were participants in linguistic change. That is, the girls were taking part in a change from above the level of consciousness favoring a prestige variant, and the boys were participating in a change from below the level of consciousness favoring a variant with less, or perhaps covert, prestige. Similarly, Reid (1978) examined the production of glottal stop and the alternation of (ing) and found style variation in 11-year-old boys in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Purcell (1984) documented social and style variation operating on several variables produced by 5- to 12-year-old speakers of Hawaiian and "General" American English. She, like Fischer, did not break her findings down by age, making it impossible to determine the contribution of her youngest speakers to her findings. Nevertheless, the results are encouraging in showing the sensitivity to stylistic and social factors in the pre-adolescent years.

One of the first studies to look at variation in preschool children was also one of the first to examine linguistic constraints on variation in children of any age. Kovac and Adamson (1981) studied deletion of finite *be* in African-American and European-American 3-, 5- and 7-year-olds. This is a well-documented feature of African-American English (Wolfram 1969, Labov 1969, 1972, Baugh 1986, Rickford et al. 1991, among others). As has been found to be the case with other dialect features throughout the history of variation studies, *be* is deleted systematically by adult speakers and is much more likely to be

deleted in some linguistic and social contexts than in others. For example, Labov (1969) demonstrated the relationship between contraction of *be* in European-American English dialects and deletion of *be* in African-American English. He found that contraction and deletion were favored by the presence of a preceding pronoun over a preceding noun, and by auxiliary *be* over copula *be*, particularly the *be* + *gonna* environment. Preceding phonological environment has also been found to affect contraction and deletion of *be*. By utilizing this variable and following the analysis of Labov (1969) the authors considered a question which continues to be critical in this field – that of developmental versus dialectal variation in child language. They found that for the European American children, absence of finite *be* appeared to be developmental in nature. For the African-American children, however, the results varied by socio-economic class. Working-class African-American children acquired the deletion rule before the middle-class children, whereas contraction preceded deletion for the middle-class children. The constraints on deletion were even more difficult to acquire than the rule itself. Although both grammatical and phonological constraints for contraction had been acquired by both groups of African American children by age 3, the constraints on deletion typical of adult speakers had not been completely acquired by age 7.

Guy and Boyd (1990) examined the grammatical constraints on (-t,d) deletion in their study of its use by speakers aged 4 to 65 in “semi-weak” or “ambiguous” past tense English verbs, such as *lost*, *told*, and *slept*. Like contraction and deletion of *be*, (-t,d) deletion is a widely studied phenomenon in dialects of English (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972, Guy 1980, Neu 1980). It is a form of consonant cluster reduction involving word-final clusters ending in /t/ or /d/ and is influenced by both the grammatical form of the word in containing the (-t,d) feature as well as phonological constraints, particularly the phonological segment following the cluster, and social features, such as gender, social class, and ethnicity (Guy 1980). Guy and Boyd concluded that acquisition of (-t,d) deletion in semi-weak verbs was potentially a long process, with the youngest speakers not producing the stop segments at all, leading the authors to conclude that they were not present in their underlying representations of the forms. A group of adult speakers deleted (-t,d) in final clusters in semi-weak verbs at an intermediate rate, between monomorphemic words and past tense verbs, demonstrating their analysis as a separate morphological class. A mid-level group, comprising older children and some adults, however, appeared to analyze the semi-weak verbs as essentially the same as monomorphemic words (e.g. *mist*, *cent*) and deleted the final segment accordingly, demonstrating that the treatment of the semi-weak verbs as a separate morphological class is incomplete even in some adult speakers.

Finally, Labov (1989) studied stylistic and linguistic variation for (-t,d) deletion and (ing) apicalization in a small sample of children and their parents outside Philadelphia. He found that a 7-year-old boy replicated his parents’ patterns of stylistic and linguistic variation in (-t,d) deletion with the exception of treating semi-weak verbs identically to monomorphemic words. This child had also

mastered both the linguistic and stylistic constraints on the alternation of (ing), a 6-year-old had mastered only the stylistic variation, and a 4-year-old showed no sign of acquiring the constraints on the (ing) alternation at all.

2 Current Issues in Child Language Variation

Early studies that included children in their participant groups suggest that children do acquire socially influenced variable patterns prior to adolescence and may even participate in the process of language change. Methodological challenges, however, make it problematic to answer some of the relevant questions that have emerged. One difficulty is that studies of variation generally require large amounts of data per speaker to be useful – either statistically or in charting vowel systems. In fact, Roberts (1996) reported that approximately 8–14 hours of child interview time was required to collect data on (-t,d) deletion comparable to that collected in a 1- to 2-hour adult interview. This amount of data may be difficult to collect from very young children. The early studies, discussed above, solved this dilemma either by using very small samples (one or two children) or by combining the data from their youngest children with that of older children, particularly as it must be collected in a short period of time to minimize the effect of maturation. Although these methods resulted in clear indications of acquisition of variation, more finely grained analyses are necessary to shed light on the resulting questions.

A second challenge in the exploration of child variation is the difficulty of distinguishing between variation that is socially motivated and that which is developmental in nature. This problem is complicated by the fact that, particularly as children become older, they become far more focused on their peers as primary dialect influences and much less so on their parents and other adult speech community members (Labov 1972, Eckert 2000). Eckert, in particular, notes the importance of emphasizing that the child's sociolinguistic system at any given age is not merely a "manifestation of an effort to develop 'real' language, but a fully mature linguistic form for that stage of language" (2000: 10). Although this child-centered focus on language acquisition is not new to psycholinguistic research (see, for example, Bloom and Lahey 1978), the child variationist, in fact, will receive less help from this field of inquiry than might be expected. One reason for this is that the primary focus of research in child language acquisition has been on categorical features of language. Although individual variation is acknowledged, it is frequently seen as a difference in learning style – with all styles leading to the same endpoint, the acquisition of an adult linguistic system and any remaining differences indicating potential communicative or cognitive disorders (Nelson 1973, 1975). For the most part, child language data have been examined minutely for structural consistencies in the speakers' utterances (Menyuk 1977). At the level of phonology, on which most variation studies, particularly child variation studies, have focused, the

emphasis has also been on consistency and categoricity. Intra-speaker variation is characterized in terms of its difference from adult forms. As Ingram (1986: 223) states, "As the child gets away from the peculiarities of his individual 'little language', his speech becomes more regular, and a linguist can in many cases see reasons for his distortions of normal words." More contemporary child language research, following generative linguistic theory, centers on constraints on production, as opposed to rules and processes, but the emphasis continues to be on "emergent systematicity" (Vihman 1996).

Another reason that child language literature is of limited help in tackling the question of socially meaningful variation is related to the methodological challenge posed above. Early child language studies were often diary studies, first with researchers (often also parents) writing down productions of interest, then, later, tape recording them. (See, for example, Bloom 1973, Brown 1973, Labov and Labov 1976.) These studies involved very small subject groups – often only one child. They also tended to be longitudinal in nature, so although the total data pool might be quite large, individual samples at each age were often much smaller. As sociolinguists examine child language samples for the systematic variation located within language itself (as noted by, e.g., Weinreich et al. 1968), the need for larger quantities of data from each speaker becomes obvious. Within the past decade, studies have reflected these concerns by attempting to collect larger quantities of data from younger speakers. An ongoing challenge is that the younger the child, the more such features of child language as limited intelligibility and telegraphic speech greatly increase the time needed to collect a sufficient size data pool. At the same time, the researcher must collect speech samples efficiently to minimize the impact of maturation during the data-gathering period itself. In spite of these concerns, current research has included children at the very early stages of language acquisition as well as older ones. The next section discusses some of this work and its implications on child language and variationist literature.

3 Variable Output: Child Language Production

Whereas most, although not all, of the previously discussed work has included children as the lower end of the age range in a study of speakers of varying ages, more recently the focus of child language variation research has been specifically on these younger speakers. The resultant studies have been characterized, generally, by larger data sets and by child speaker groups broken down into more tightly compressed age ranges. Adults, often the children's parents, have functioned more as comparison data and, in later work, providers of the children's language input, much as they have functioned in studies of first language acquisition.

Labov (1989) noted that as children's language input is variable, as demonstrated by the voluminous research on adult variation, it stands to reason that

children's output would be also. This statement, reasonable as it may seem, however, is a long way from demonstrating the connection between language input and a resultant child language system. This very connection has been hotly debated for years by psycholinguists and linguists engaged in the exploration of the nature vs. nurture question in child development. The role of language input in child language variation is discussed in the next section, but, in general, it is not necessary for variationists to enter into the center of this debate in order to discuss the modeling and acquisition of language features that are clearly socially governed and dialect specific. Therefore, the first of these more specific studies took as a working assumption that the early input children receive is indeed variable and examined instead the question of whether or not very young children reproduced these dialect features themselves and at what age.

For example, Roberts (1996, 1997a) examined the much-studied English variable (-t,d) deletion in 3- and 4-year-old Philadelphia children. As discussed above, social, grammatical and phonological constraints have all been found to be operating on the phenomenon of (-t,d) deletion in adult speakers of English. Whereas Guy and Boyd (1990) noted, among other findings, that very young children did not include these word final stops in their lexical representations of semi-weak verb forms, their study was, as noted above, characterized by a rather small sample of children in age groups spanning several years. The purpose of Roberts' study was to examine this same phenomenon with a larger sample of more closely age-matched speakers. Sixteen children served as participants in this study, which comprised 146 hours of audio-taping. Tokens of possible (-t,d) deletion items ranged in number from 44 from an especially quiet child to about 250 from more verbal children. The children were found to be well on their way to acquiring the phonological and morphological constraints on (-t,d) deletion found in many studies of adult speakers. They demonstrated an acquisition of the following segment constraint that was very close to that of adults, including the inhibiting effect of following pause on deletion, found to be typical in Philadelphia but not in New York by Guy (1980). This particular finding suggested strongly that the children were indeed learning socially significant features, not responding to a universal constraint of consonant cluster reduction. Further, the children demonstrated the adult pattern of deleting (-t,d) segments more often in monomorphemic words than in regular past tense verbs. For the semi-weak verbs, however, the similarity with adult speech ended, with the children consistently treating the semi-weak verbs like monomorphemic words (i.e. high probability of deletion, but not categorical deletion as found by Guy and Boyd) and the adults treating them like regular past tense verbs (i.e. low probability of deletion). In addition, examination of the data revealed that as the children produced increased numbers of more sophisticated grammatical forms, such as participles, they demonstrated adult-like deletion with them, suggesting that variation is learned simultaneously with the related grammatical and lexical forms. The resulting argument was that the children were indeed engaging in systematic variation,

often quite similar in structure to those of their parents, and they did appear to include the final (-t,d) stops in their underlying representations of semi-weak verbs. The results strongly suggested that the children were formulating rules, not learning patterns in an item-by-item fashion, and they demonstrated adult-like patterns of deletion only when they shared an adult-like structural analysis. Finally, there were indications of early emerging gender differences, as the girls in the study deleted (-t,d) more often than the boys – a finding in contrast to most studies of the same variable in adult speakers. The study explored children's acquisition of stable variation only, however. It did not address children's acquisition of sound change in progress, nor did it explore the question of whether or not children were able to move beyond acquisition and participate in the variation and change patterns of the speech community of which they were a part.

Roberts and Labov (1995) examined these issues in a study of acquisition of the Philadelphia short *a* (as in *cat*) pattern by some of the same preschool children participating in Roberts (1996, 1997a). The vowel pattern in question is a highly complex one and features lexical, phonological, and grammatical conditioning. For example, short *a* preceding /f/, /θ/, /s/, /m/ and /n/ is raised and tensed, whereas in the environment of /p/, /b/, /d/, /k/, etc., the production of short *a* is low and lax. However, there are lexical exceptions to this phonological conditioning in that in the words *mad*, *bad*, and *glad*, in which short *a* would be predicted to be lax, it is, in fact, tense. In spite of the complexity of this pattern, the children demonstrated significant learning of Philadelphia short *a*. Some of the more straightforward and stable constraints, such as tensing before nasals and in *mad*, *bad*, and *glad*, were consistently produced. However, some of these patterns have been demonstrated to be in the process of change, such as the environments before /l/ (e.g. *personality*) and intervocalic /n/ (e.g. *planet*), to the tense short *a* class in adult Philadelphia speakers. Yet, they were still being acquired by the children. Between the ages of 3 and 4, they demonstrated active improvement in their learning of these features. They also showed increased rates of tensing in these environments where change was occurring as compared with adults, which suggested that they were beginning to participate actively in the process of language change. This finding has important implications to the future study of this area as it highlights the possibility that children of this age are interesting to variationists, not only because they are actively acquiring socially-governed features but also because they are influencing changes and may be indicating sites of change that may be accelerated or otherwise modified as the children mature.

Foulkes et al. (1999) also explored the acquisition of variation in preschool children. In their study of glottal variation in 40 children from Newcastle upon Tyne, aged 2 to 4 years, they found that children were able to learn sophisticated variable patterns at quite young ages. Glottalization of /t/ encompasses both the replacement and the reinforcement of /t/ by glottal stop. They pointed out that, unlike traditional phonological researchers, they were not interested in

the emergence of phonological contrasts but rather in the range of alternants acquired by the children, and, similar to previous findings on other variables, they concluded that the children were making good progress in mastering the complicated glottal stop pattern. In addition, however, acoustic analysis revealed that high degrees of pre-aspiration of /t/ was found in the children's speech, including that of the 2-year-olds, for (t) in utterance-final position. This finding runs counter to those reported by others, such as Locke (1983, in Foulkes et al. 1999: 17), who claimed children to be "operating under phonological rules of simplification." This pre-aspiration pattern was found to be predominant in the speech of young women in Newcastle upon Tyne, but it was adopted by both the boys and girls in the study. Finally, there are some patterns of glottalization that are lexically restricted, such as the substitution of glottal stop for /t/ in word-final, pre-pausal position, as well as the use of [r] for /t/. Although amounts of this type of data were small in the samples (19 tokens), the children did appear to show sensitivity to this type of lexical conditioning, in that they produced [r] only in words that would tolerate them in adult speech.

The work discussed above demonstrates clearly that children begin their acquisition of variation early – presumably with the acquisition of language. Although the "teasing apart" of social from developmental variation continues to be a challenge in this area, there is evidence in the form of emerging gender differences and some early findings of style differences that socially motivated variation has its beginnings in the earliest phases of language acquisition (Reid 1978, Romaine 1978, Labov 1989, Roberts 1996, 1997a, Eckert 2000). Continued work, with even larger data sets, is necessary to do the type of examinations of social class and other extra-linguistic factors that have been so fruitful in adult language variation studies. In short, however, all of the preceding work underscores the point that children are indeed members of their speech communities from their earliest linguistic interactions and have much to tell us about early variation and change.

4 Variable Input: Child Directed Speech (CDS)

With the existing evidence supporting the hypothesis that children are acquiring variable patterns early along with categorical forms, researchers began to look more closely to the input children were receiving and to their responses to that input. Historically, variation in input has not been seen by the linguistic community as necessarily helpful to a child's acquisition of language. Rather, it has been viewed more frequently as detrimental, or part of the "noise" in the "degenerate quality" of the input data children receive (Chomsky 1965: 58). Even the considerable research on child directed speech (CDS), beginning with Ferguson (1977), is focused on the simplification, exaggeration, and consistency of the input and its effectiveness or, sometimes, lack of effectiveness in language

teaching, not on its variety. Closer looks at input have been taken by variationists examining a number of features.

Labov (1990) noted the similarity between children's dialect-specific productions and those of their mothers, and hypothesized that the early child care situation which is often female dominated could lead to a favoring of female-led sound changes and a disfavoring of those led by males. Roberts (1997b) examined this hypothesis again, using the same Philadelphia preschool speakers. It was found that the female-led changes were, in fact, learned most effectively by the children as compared with the one male-led change – the centralization of long (ay), as in *kite*. In addition, even though all of the children in the study were natives of Philadelphia and attended day care with Philadelphia children and teachers, the changes were acquired most effectively by the children who also had parents who were Philadelphia natives. These results support the conclusion that early input is important, at least in the early learning of socially-influenced variables.

Foulkes et al. (1999) also noted the importance of early input. As previously noted, they found that the features of pre-aspiration characterizing the speech of young women were more easily learned by both the boys and girls in their study than features characteristic of adult men in the community. They also made the argument that rather than being dysfunctional to language acquisition, variation in the input to young speakers can actually enhance the movement from the holistic word level of representation to segmental awareness by producing allophonic examples, which "may serve to highlight the location of permutable components of words" (Foulkes et al. 1999: 20).

The movement from the lexical to the segmental level of phonological acquisition is a subject that continues to engage psycholinguists and developmental phonologists. Agreement as to the nature and timing of this process is still elusive. Whereas some researchers have found segmental awareness to occur early in the language acquisition process, others have reported that it continues well into the school years. (See Vihman 1996, for a review of this literature.) In addition to aiding this process in children, as Foulkes et al. propose, it is possible that the presence of socially-governed, allophonic variation in young children, noted by Foulkes et al. and Roberts (1996, 1997a) and others, also supports an argument for early segmental awareness. At the very least, the findings suggest an early beginning to this phenomenon.

This emergence of segmental awareness could also indicate to young children the locations of systematic variation in the input grammar – locations that could be exploited in later years. Some preliminary work on Southern American English, as spoken by mothers to their toddlers and to an interviewer in Memphis, Tennessee suggests that this may be the case (Roberts 1999). Three mothers and toddlers (aged 18 to 19 months) were tape-recorded during play. The variable in question was monothongal long (ay), as in [ka:t] for *kite*, documented both in Alabama speech (Feagin 1979) and in Memphis adults (Fridland 1999). Two of the three children produced both monothongal and diphthongal long (ay), while the third produced only monothongal (ay). As the toddlers

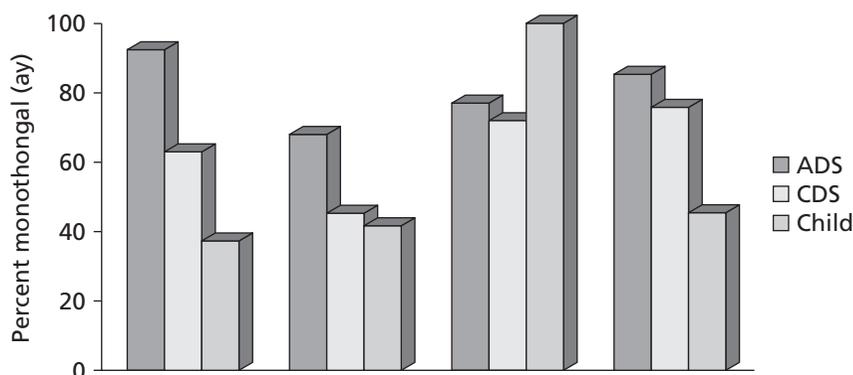


Figure 13.1 Comparison of adult and child directed speech of mothers and their toddlers' speech: monophthongization of long /ay/

were just beginning to acquire diphthongs, the variation in these speakers was most likely developmental, not socially governed. However, observation of two 4-year-old speakers revealed that their long (ay) productions also contained both monothongal and diphthongal tokens. Although further research is needed for documentation, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that in these children, the variation of long (ay) would continue, whereas children speaking dialects in which long (ay) is more consistently diphthongal would move from developmental variation to near-categorically diphthongal productions.

More than the behavior of the children, however, it was the Child Directed Speech (CDS) of their mothers that revealed some clues about the process of early dialect learning. CDS has been frequently studied by psycholinguists as a widespread way of speaking to very young children (Ferguson 1977). (Similar registers have been observed in speech directed to animals, foreigners, intimate acquaintances, etc.) Although the efficacy of this register in stimulating language development continues to be debated, it appears clear that to the extent that variation is present in CDS, it becomes part of the child's linguistic input. In the current study, the mothers were tape-recorded both playing with their toddlers and speaking to an interviewer. Although all three mothers demonstrated variation between diphthongal and monothongal (ay), they all used more diphthongal (ay) when talking to their children than when talking to an interviewer, as shown in figure 13.1. In addition, one of the mothers was especially straightforward in using CDS to instruct her child in the pronunciation of new vocabulary containing long (ay). When introducing a word, particularly a noun, she would produce it with great stress and exaggerate the glide. A likely interpretation of these data would be that the mothers are "instructing" their children in the more standard diphthongal production of (ay). Although this may seem to run counter to the claim that children learn variable patterns very early as they learn invariant ones, an alternative interpretation of the

findings suggests that this is not the case. Rather, what the children are, in fact, exposed to is variable production of long (ay). The mothers use quite a bit of monothongal (ay) in both their talk to their children and to the interviewer. In the case of the mother described above, she is actually exposing her daughter to a wide-ranging variable pattern – from no glide at all to an exaggerated, highly stressed glide. The mothers in this study appear to be taking their role as “teachers of language” seriously and utilizing child directed speech to aid them in this process. Variation is present, and sometimes exaggerated, in first language input from very early stages!

Input is also important in the work in second dialect acquisition in children that builds on the work of Payne (1980), who found age and complexity of the feature in relation to the speaker’s native dialect to be important factors in the adoption of Philadelphia dialect features by newcomers to the area. Chambers (1992) also found that age of exposure to the second dialect affected the success of its acquisition. That is, the children in his study who were exposed to a new dialect at a later age were far less successful at adopting it than those exposed at an earlier age. Chambers also postulated eight principles of second dialect acquisition to aid in the prediction of the process of dialect feature adoption by new speakers. Whereas some of these, such as the effect of orthographic representation on acquisition, have no relevance to first dialect acquisition, others may be seen as a jumping-off point for future research looking at how preschool and young children acquire dialect forms. For example, Chambers proposes that whether or not a target form is variable in native speech in the dialect being acquired, it is found to be variable in the speech of new speakers. He likens this phenomenon to the process of lexical diffusion in which language change is argued to begin in a few lexical items, then, when it has spread to a critical mass, is generalized into a rule or phonological process.

In a similar vein, Kerswill (1996) examined the dialect in the newly developed town of Milton Keynes. In this and previous work (e.g. Kerswill and Williams 1992), he, too, found that age of dialect exposure greatly affected the process of acquisition. The youngest speakers (aged 4) tended to adopt the features of their parents and, hence, to show more variation in this heterogeneous population than older children, who tended to coalesce toward a common norm. Kerswill also postulates a difficulty hierarchy for second dialect acquisition with vocabulary borrowing as the easiest process, which may be accomplished throughout the life span. The most difficult would be “lexically conditioned phonological rules, which may reflect lexical diffusion nearing completion and which are not sociolinguistically salient” (Kerswill 1996: 200). He hypothesizes that these rules must be learned by age 3 to be fully acquired.

Research on the variability of language input, as can be seen from the above discussion, is an especially new area of research in language variation and change. It can, however, be particularly helpful in looking at such issues as transmission of variation and change across generations. It would also seem to be potentially very useful in examining the genesis of language style in young children, since stylistic range is often accentuated in such registers as child

directed speech. Finally, the integration of findings from second dialect acquisition research into that of first dialect acquisition would appear to be fruitful for both areas of study, particularly as some of the more complex dialect features (e.g. short (a) in Philadelphia and the lexically conditioned rules in Milton Keynes) appear to require an intensity of input that may become increasingly rare in more mobile populations or those in which dialect leveling may be occurring.

5 Looking to the Future: Social Practice and Young Children

Eckert (2000) discusses the importance of recognizing dialect variation among children and adolescents as a form of social practice. She notes that although adolescence is a time when vernacular forms accelerate, sociolinguistic competence has been developing for years. By secondary school, the social and educational institutions are such that the speaker's focus is concentrated to a large extent on peers, rather than on adults. Before that time, however, the focus of power and influence is not clear, or, one might say the transition from the full concentration on adults as the source of influence in infancy to the dominance of peer-group influence in adolescence is a gradual process. Such a transitional phase presents a challenge to researchers to sort out the influence of parents and other important adults from that of peers in earlier age groups. Another way of stating this is that determining the point at which children stop primarily imitating the social meaning of adults and begin to utilize language socially themselves is an important goal of child variation research – but an elusive one for the researcher due to the ephemeral nature of the developmental process. Therefore, as Eckert and research reported in the previous discussion show, much of the research on very young children has thus far concentrated on discovering the age(s) at which children acquire particular patterns of variation and their constraints. This work has resulted in important findings that children do, in fact, acquire sometimes complex variable patterns quite early and may begin the social use of variation at the same time. These results continue to be replicated with additional variables in additional dialects and speech communities. It would seem to be a goal of future research to add to these findings an exploration of the emerging social meaning of child variation within the family and peer group interactional settings.

An analogous situation may be seen in earlier psycholinguistic work. Following Chomsky's (1965) work, which had a huge impact not only on linguistics as a whole but also on child language theory and research, much psycholinguistic effort went into syntactic analyses of child language as compared with that of adults. Bloom and Lahey (1978) were among the first to note that child language would be more fruitfully studied if children's utterances were not seen as immature adult sentences and child speakers were not

seen as miniature, but flawed, adults rather than fully competent speakers of child language. They make the following argument:

In the course of development, children are not learning adult “parts of speech,” and descriptions of the words that children use in terms of adult parts of speech can be misleading. Instead, children learn whatever forms they hear and see in conjunction with the regular recurring experiences that are represented in memory. Thus, it is only coincidental that in the model of the adult language, “cookie” and “sweater” are *nouns*, “see” and “put” are *verbs*, “there,” “more,” and “away” are *adverbs*, and “up” is a *preposition*. More important are the ideas, the elements of content that children represent with the words they use.

(Bloom and Lahey 1978: 39)

Bloom and Lahey viewed child language as a viable and vital system in its own right, and one worth studying in all of its complexity. They developed the concept of semantic relations to explore how very young children coded meaning in their spontaneous speech. For example, the relational concept of *non-existence* can be described as an object which does not exist for the child but which the child thinks could exist. A child could express this concept using any of several forms. She could say, for example, “no,” “gone,” “allgone,” or even the object name (e.g. “cookie”) with a rising intonation while looking for the cookie. Some of these are adult-like forms, whereas others, such as “allgone,” are present only in child language. All, however, serve the function of expressing the meaning of non-existence.

The change from a focus on child language as an imperfect, but emerging, adult system had a large and important impact on the study of child language acquisition. It seems unlikely, or at least of increased difficulty, that such a psycholinguistic advance would have taken place without the previous volume of research on adult language and that comparing emergent child language to an adult model. The same may be true of child language variation study. There is copious evidence of the richness and vitality of variation in adult language and less, but nevertheless increasing, evidence of children’s ability to acquire this variation early in their language learning process. It appears to be time to delve more deeply into children’s knowledge of variation and their ability to use it to produce social meaning. Again, preliminary results suggest a productive future for this type of work. Preschool children have been found to participate in language change, as shown by their adopting a lexical redistribution of short *a* words at a higher rate than their parents (Roberts and Labov 1995), and to adopt forms in a new dialect not produced by their parents (Roberts 1997b, Kerswill 1996). Gender differences have also been noted (Foulkes et al. 1999, Roberts 1997a). Current work on caretaker input for toddlers and young preschool children has the potential to teach us more about the direct and indirect teaching of language variation as social identity. It remains, however, for in-depth work to be done on the establishment of social practice in children before adolescence. As we look at the future of the study

of language variation and change, surely an important aspect of this exploration is the newest speakers of the community as they acquire the dialect patterns of tomorrow.

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