

Variable forms are difficult to acquire

Psychology



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Until the late 1960's it was still the largely subscribed view that children's language acquisition was, on the main part, innate and occurred independently from the social context and surroundings in which the child was brought up. However there have been movements in recent years to account for the effects that parents and other caregivers have on the linguistic development of a child (Romaine, 1986: 159).

This paper intends to briefly look at the standard accepted view of acquisition of variation; the variationist view, which considers the social context; and to place these viewpoints into a current frame of reference by examining some contemporary studies. It intends to examine the studies in relation to acquisition of variable forms in early childhood and in adolescence.

The mainstream view of acquisition of variation is that during the early years of childhood, the main period of acquisition, most of the linguistic input comes from the primary care givers, i. . the mother and father. For this reason " motherese" has long been the main focus of first language acquisition studies (Kerswill, 1996: 181). The conventional view of first language acquisition is that during the first year of life a child will gain control over their speech organs and begin to acquire speech patterns. About the time a child reaches his first birthday he begins to understand and produce words in isolation.

Typically these words are to do with the child's immediate environment: objects including food, clothing, people and toy items; there are also words denoting actions or motions such as " peek-a-boo" and " open"; lastly there

are words used in social interaction including "yes", "no", "hi" etc. At around 18 months a child's vocabulary expands dramatically and they begin to form two word strings. These are generally very basic explanations of the world around them.

They explain objects or people appearing or disappearing or moving about; owners and properties of things; they comment on people doing or seeing things and ask about who what and where. After this children progress to three word strings and between the ages of two and a half and three and a half children's language develops so as to allow for fluent grammatical conversations (Pinker). In general the standard view of variation in language acquisition is that because children are aiming for the perfect grammar i. . . one that isn't variable, they sporadically omit elements and grammatical forms from their speech in their attempt to use the correct variant. The standardized view of language acquisition is that, as previously mentioned, the main input for the child's learning is the speech of the mother. So it was presumed that mothers adapted their speech to eliminate variation, which was seen as "noise", so that they provided the child with "a simpler, cleaner corpus from which to learn language" (Snow, 1995: 180).

The variationist view of acquisition differs in that it shows that mothers switch between dialectal and standard forms when talking to children. They do it frequently and subconsciously according to whom they are speaking with and the social situation. The variationist view allows children to see when and where variant forms are appropriate, because their parents use them in the correct place, and so the children learn to switch between standard and dialectal forms in the same way as their primary care givers.

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The children are exhibiting " a clear link between the adult and the child features" where " the child can be seen attempting to approximate the adult model" (Kerswill, 1996: 188). This view is very different from the standard; children are using variant dialectal forms because they are aiming for the correct, standard, variant and missing and not because they are appropriate for the situation.

This is supported by the fact that children use variant dialectal forms correctly in the correct social situations; if they were randomly aiming for a variant then surely they would not distinguish between all the variables available to them on the basis of social context. This is exemplified in a study by Youssef (1993) where data was collected from three children of pre school age in Trinidad. The data was analysed for stylistic variation between the Trinidad Creole, TC, and Standard English, SE, in the Verb Phrase which shows marked differences between TC and SE.

It was shown that all three children shifted their speech style according to situation and addressee; more formal situations such as when the child was at school or during an interview required more use of the SE forms but informal situations such as when the child was at play or in a relaxed environment allow for the use of variants from TC (Youssef, 1993: 257-274). This supports the idea that children learn to use variable forms at the same time as they learn to use the standard variant. Not only this they learn which is appropriate in which situation at the same time.

The variationist view of acquisition of variation also supports the view that " the dialect transmission period begins early - before the age of maximal peer

group influence" (Roberts, 1997b: 249). This means that a child growing up in a particular speech community will in turn speak like that community, following its rules and speaking with its dialect. It also shows that variation is primarily acquired in the early years of childhood and not so much in later childhood and adolescence; supporting the fact that it isn't difficult for children to learn the variant forms.

Kerswill's (1996: 90) study supports this showing that " children acquire most, if not all the phonological features of their local variety by the age of six". This supports the view that young children do not find it difficult to learn variant forms. Could the same be said for older children and adolescents? Once children age and become closer to the critical age for dialect acquisition it becomes more difficult for them to learn variant forms but some rules and oppositions can still be acquired.

It is at this age that children begin to diverge from their primary caregivers' speech style and begin to converge towards the speech style of their peers (Kerswill, 1996: 92). This shows that children are using a different style, " they acquire the vernacular of the area between the ages of 5 and 12" (Chambers 1995: 153), from their parents and are using the dialectal variables that they learned in earlier childhood. They develop new norms personal to them in their speech community distinct from the norms of their parents.

In the main, this stage finds children moving from parent orientated to peer orientated networks and in the process they acquire morphologically conditioned rules (Kerswill, 1996: 94). Once children have passed the critical

age of dialect acquisition, any age between the ages of seven and sixteen depending on the child, they are equivalent to an adult in terms of their ability to acquire language. At this age adolescents are desperately seeking peer acceptance and identity.

They form social networks or groups at school which are quite distinct in many ways, including linguistically, from one another. The adolescents therefore change their style of speaking in accordance with accommodation theory. So adolescents will adapt their variants to be either in line with or distinct from those from another social group. This is important for acquisition of variation because as adolescents converge to be more like a social grouping they may acquire the variants that the group uses; in the same way they also pick up the intonation style of the group (Kerswill, 1996: 98-100).

At this stage the adolescents, although trying to be distinct from adults, are acquiring knowledge of adult norms. Their desire for an individual social identity means that adolescents are willing to modify their speech but at the same time they no longer have the ability to acquire lexically complex rules, new oppositions or new intonational systems (Kerswill, 1996: 100). Most of the changes that now take place are word changes, with vocabulary continuing to extend for many years after this time.

It can be seen that most of the variants are acquired in early childhood before the age of six. Children acquire these variants through the style shifting, between formal and vernacular, of their primary caregivers. From this they also learn which variant is appropriate in which social situation. At

this early stage children acquire new variants with relative ease. After this stage children move into formal education and start to use more of the dialectal variants, they become distinct from their parents in their norm use.

At this stage children are still able to acquire some variant forms, rules and oppositions but this is much more difficult than it was previously. Once children reach the age of adolescence they struggle to acquire new forms despite adapting their speech style to be like the social group they have aligned themselves with. After the age of sixteen, at the very latest, they are considered adults in terms of language acquisition. The only changes which take place from now on are word changes.

This paper has examined standard accepted view of acquisition of variation and the variationist view; it has looked at the contemporary studies in relation to acquisition of variable forms in early childhood and in adolescence. From the evidence examined it can be concluded that variable forms are easily acquired in early childhood, during the first stage of language acquisition. As the children age it becomes increasingly difficult for them to acquire the different forms and by the age of sixteen they no longer have the ability to acquire variant forms.