

Growing up and apart: Gender divergences in two Chicagoland elementary schools

Children actively socialize themselves and others through play, friendship, and the strategic language use that play and friendship require (Kyratzis, 2004, Paugh 2005). One characteristic of children's social orders is relative gender segregation. Girls tend to play more with girls and boys with boys. This practice emerges around the age of three and peaks in early adolescence or middle childhood. In other words, as children move from pre-school through elementary school, they increasingly segregate themselves along lines of gender. If children tend to separate into same-gender peer groups, their interactions across the gender line will not be as frequent as their interactions with members of the same sex. If less frequent, in keeping with Bloomfield's assertion (1933:46) that "density of communication" results in the "most important differences of speech" within a community, one may predict statistical differences to emerge progressively among girls and boys. Specifically, if the degree of separation between girls and boys sequentially increases during pre-adolescence, the frequencies of variants of sociolinguistic variables expressed by girls and by boys would also sequentially diverge as they age from the early to the later grades of elementary school. In the research presented here, we investigate this prediction in the English spoken by children from two public schools in the Chicago metropolitan area. We focus on two stable variables: word initial and internal (dh) and word final (ing). One school is an inner-city public school where 49 children from second, fourth, and seventh grades were interviewed. The majority of children are from families employed in Service, Skilled or Unskilled work as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Ethnically, the kids are Chinese- and European- American. The other school is from a Chicago suburb where 42 children from second and fifth grades were interviewed. Here the majority of children come from families employed as Professionals, Administrative / Managerial, and Technical workers. Ethnically, the kids are African- and European-American. Comparisons across the two schools permit tests of the prediction of increasing gender divergence across levels of social class, different yet parallel grade sequences (second - fourth - seventh // second - fifth), and ethnicity. Initial results on a sub-sample in the suburban school on the variable of (dh) support the prediction .

Fifth and Second Grade by Girls and by Boys (Suburban School: Variable = (dh) > [ð] & [d])

Fifth Grade					Second Grade				
		<u>ð</u>	<u>d</u>			<u>ð</u>	<u>d</u>		
Girls	N	141	59	200	Girls	N	101	49	150
	%	70	30			%	67	33	
Boys	N	42	58	100	Boys	N	57	43	100
	%	42	58			%	57	43	

As predicted, the point spread separating the girls from the boys in Fifth Grade is larger (70% - 42% = 28 points) than the point spread between girls and boys in Second Grade (67% - 57% = 10 points). These results contribute to research into the actions, both intentional and unintentional, by which children linguistically socialize themselves. Moreover, it extends the research of Cameron (2005) in which dialect principles are combined with findings from social psychology to make coherent predictions about how age and gender and interact in the expression of sociolinguistic variation at different stages of life.