

Beyond purple Tellytubbies: The emergence of variation in toddlers

Child phonologists have noted the utility of exploring cross-linguistic, but not cross-dialect, acquisition in order to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon. They have shown that, even before meaningful speech occurs, children's early sound productions are related to the language present in their learning environment (Boysson-Bardies, Sagart et al. 1984; Boysson-Bardies and Vihman 1991). This is true and regardless of the segment type (i.e., vowels as well as consonants). Nevertheless, Locke (1983) notes that it is difficult to ascertain when the child has attained full mastery of the range of gestures that make up the emergent phonemes and proposes an experiment in which adults are asked to learn a phonetically-based and non-phonetically based rule to model this type of learning. However, it would seem that the 'natural' experiment of first dialect acquisition would present a far better means of exploring this issue.

Variationists, too, have a long history of exploring the mechanisms, physiological and historical, of language change. Although children are clearly in the throes of changing systems during the acquisition period, and, therefore, not reliable demonstrators of any systematic stability, they can be viewed as providing a vantage point into some of the more physiological aspects of change. As such, we can learn from them what changes are likely to have the "advantage" of phonetic naturalness and/or simplicity, and when children, even during the time when the language learning curve may be at its steepest, will override the physiological constraints in favor of speech community membership.

The current study explores the emergence of dialect features using data from two children (ages 18 to 36 months) from each of two dialect areas: New York City and rural Vermont. The two dialects contrast in a number of social and linguistic ways. In addition to the obvious urban/rural difference and its related difference in the vitality of the two dialects, there are phonological differences that are important to the current study as well. Two of these will be explored in the current paper: 1. difference in the number of vowels in the system as related to the low back merger/distinction; 2. difference in the complexity of the system as related to the patterning of short 'a'. Results of an analysis of the spontaneous speech of the four speakers reveal that interphonemic differences appear to be acquired before intraphonemic differences, and phonetic 'naturalness' provides a support for vowel acquisition in that, when learning intraphonemic patterning, children make use of physiological support. Finally, there is emerging evidence that lexical learning may provide a bridge to larger phonological patterns.

References:

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