

‘Mam, ma trousers is fa’in doon!’
Morphosyntax vs. phonology in the acquisition of variation

Recent work on acquisition in sociolinguistic research suggests that the structured variation found in adolescent and adult speech is evident in children’s speech from the very start of the acquisition process. Roberts and Labov (1995:101) propose that children ‘acquire variable rules at about the same time as they are acquiring related categorical rules.’ Chambers (2003:174) goes further when he observes that ‘There are no studies indicating a time gap between the acquisition of grammatical competence and the development of sociolinguistic competence’. Labov defines the role of the caregiver in this process, stating that ‘Linguistic variation is transmitted to children as stylistic differentiation on the formal/informal dimension...formal speech variants are associated by children with instruction and punishment, informal speech with intimacy and fun’ (Labov 2001:437).

In this paper we test these claims through a cross-sectional analysis of the acquisition of variable forms in a Scottish dialect. Eleven children aged 2;10 to 3;6, and their primary caregivers were recorded for 5-10 hours each in everyday interaction, and the data fully transcribed in CHILDES format (MacWhinney, 1995). One phonological (1) and one morphosyntactic variable (2) are targeted.

- (1) a. Phone the bobbies so they can get me /**ʌ**ut/...
b. So they can get me /**u**t/!

- (2) a. Your leggies **are** cold...
b. Your feeties **is** cold as well.

Quantitative analysis of over 3000 contexts of use provides only partial support for these claims. In (1), the caregivers and children in the youngest dyads use (1a) only, whereas the older dyads use both. Thus there is no variation in the initial stages. When two forms are used however, the variation is conditioned by the style shifting proposed by Labov in both the caregiver and child speech. In contrast, with (2), both forms are used regardless of age but these are not subject to style shifting. Instead the variation is conditioned by a highly complex set of grammatical constraints in both caregiver and child speech.

These results suggest that not all (socio)linguistic variables are acquired in the same way. For some variables, multiple variants are acquired from the outset, for others, a single form is acquired first; some variables exhibit stylistic conditioning, others grammatical conditioning only. We explore the ramifications of these findings for understanding the mechanisms involved in acquisition of dialect forms at the very earliest age and hence in later life.

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MacWhinney, J. (1995) *The CHILDES project. Tools for analysing talk*. (2nd edition). Hillsdale NJ, Erlbaum.

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