

Acquiring Sociolinguistic Variation

Edited by
Gunther De Vogelaer
Matthias Katerbow

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Studies in Language Variation

20

The study of how linguistic variation is acquired is considered a nascent field in both psycho- and sociolinguistics. Within that research context, this book aims at two objectives. First, it wants to help bridging the gap between researchers working on acquisition from different theoretical backgrounds. The book therefore includes contributions by both psycho- and sociolinguists, and by representatives of further relevant sub-disciplines of linguistics, including historical linguistics and dialectology. Second, in order to enable cross-linguistic comparison, the book brings together research carried out in different sociolinguistic constellations, as most obviously found in different language areas or different countries.

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De Vogelaar & Kateerboom

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Bridging the gap between language acquisition and sociolinguistics

Introduction to an interdisciplinary topic

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and Aurélie Nardy

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Despite repeated calls for in-depth research, the acquisition of patterns of sociolinguistic variation has long been an underinvestigated topic both in sociolinguistics and in language acquisition research. With the exception of a few exploratory studies, most notably Labov (1964), it has long been rare for sociolinguistic research to focus on non-adults, whereas most research on language acquisition tended to take place in a sociolinguistic vacuum (see, e.g. Mills 1985: 142 and Labov 1989: 96 for statements to this effect). Over the last few years, however, the situation seems to be changing. Two reasons may be given for this: first, and quite trivially perhaps, technical advancements are making it possible to gather, store and explore data in cheap and efficient ways, providing researchers with the necessary data to conduct empirically sound research on the topic. And second, parallel to a paradigm shift from rule-based to usage-based conceptions of grammar, linguistic variation has moved into the centre of the attention of theoretical linguistics. As a result, the acquisition of variation can now be considered an ‘emergent topic’ in research on language variation in general.

The aim of this book is to offer a state-of-the-art of current research on the topic, thereby focusing on two particular objectives: (1) the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation presents itself as an interesting research topic for sociolinguists and psycholinguists working on acquisition, but also for a broad range of other sub-disciplines of linguistics, including historical linguistics, dialectology, and for researchers working in different theoretical frameworks. This book aims at bridging the gap between these disciplines and frameworks and allowing an *interdisciplinary perspective* on the topic; and (2) in order to enable *cross-linguistic comparison*, the book wants to bring together research carried out

in different sociolinguistic constellations, as most obviously found in different language areas or different countries.

Keywords: language acquisition, psycholinguistics, language variation, sociolinguistics, cognition

1. Introduction

A few exceptions notwithstanding, it has long been rare both for sociolinguistic research to focus on non-adults and for research on language acquisition to pay attention to sociolinguistic variation. This is probably due to the way sociolinguistics and language acquisition research became prominent fields in linguistics, which, roughly speaking, dates back to the 1960s. The then emerging linguistic paradigms, i.e. the Chomskyan paradigm in language acquisition research and the Labovian one in sociolinguistics, became dominant and had an enormous impact for the decades to come, without really stirring the interest in the way patterns of sociolinguistic variation are acquired. This is in a way remarkable, as basic assumptions in both paradigms implicitly acknowledge that much is to be gained from including language variation in language acquisition research, or from an acquisitionist perspective on language variation.

Linguistics' interest in language acquisition was to a large extent stirred by the advent of the generative paradigm. Indeed one of the lasting contributions of the Chomskyan revolution is its focus on competence and 'I-language', which provided linguistics with a profoundly cognitive orientation, and linked aspects of linguistic structure to innate characteristics of the human mind. Among other things, acquisition research has been used to determine the structural status of linguistic elements in grammars. One common assumption is that the order in which parts of a grammar are acquired, reflects their position in the adult system: basic and/or important traits are acquired before peripheral elements (cf. Mills 1986). In generativist thinking, variation has long been considered quasi unimportant for linguistic theory. This is obvious for instance in Chomsky's homogeneity axiom.

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

(Chomsky 1965: 3)

The homogeneity axiom should be read as a plea for descriptive abstraction rather than a principled exclusion of variation, however, and does not entail any claim to

the effect that linguistics should only be concerned with standard varieties. In fact, few generative linguists would dispute the idea that non-standard languages, such as dialects, have their own grammars and can be studied as proper I-languages, too (see De Vogelaer and Seiler 2012; De Vogelaer and Klom 2013 for discussion). Knowing how profoundly non-standard grammars can differ from standard languages and each other, the enormous potential of research into the acquisition of non-standard varieties in terms of broadening the empirical scope of linguistics must be acknowledged, which has been done in fields like dialect phonology and dialect syntax. Apart from insight into the structure of grammar, a variationist perspective also provides a better understanding of the nature of acquisition processes. For instance, studies on second dialect acquisition have been interpreted in support of the validity of the Critical Period Hypothesis for second language acquisition (e.g. Payne 1976; Chambers 1992). More recently, investigations on language learners who have been exposed to variation in the input are providing answers to the question of the extent to which regularities in language are internalized as ‘rules’, as assumed within the generative tradition, or rather derive from concrete linguistic experiences stored in memory, as assumed in exemplar-based or item-based grammars (e.g. Roberts 1994; Foulkes, Docherty, and Watt 2001; Díaz-Campos 2004; Nardy, Chevrot, and Barbu 2013). Some relevant case studies are discussed below.

The rise of sociolinguistics is strongly associated with Labov’s work, which is deeply rooted in historical linguistics as well, as becomes evident in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968). The main methodological contribution of the Labovian paradigm is probably the apparent-time method, which allows to confidently detect processes of ongoing change within locations on the basis of quantitative data. The apparent-time method is only suitable to *observe* change-in-progress, however, because it crucially assumes a fixed adult grammar, which locates the pivotal moment for change in the intergenerational transmission of language, that means: in childhood and adolescence (cf. Labov 2007 on ‘transmission’). The apparent-time construct has been tested empirically and is proven to be, by and large, valid (see Sankoff and Blondeau 2007 for discussion). To reveal the underlying dynamics of language change, and to find empirically solid answers to questions such as the *how* and *why* of language change, therefore, it is important to conduct research on how patterns of sociolinguistic variation are acquired and differentially reproduced by non-adults, rather than restricting oneself to an investigation of diachronic sequences of synchronic stages (cf. Katerbow 2013). This is especially obvious in cases where the non-adults’ language is fundamentally different from the adult models, as in situations of extensive language contact, a case in point being the so-called New Towns, where children and adolescents appear to blend a new variety based on varieties spoken by older generations (e.g. Kerswill and Williams 2000).

Sitting at the interface between language acquisition research (or the wider domain of psycholinguistics) on the one hand, and sociolinguistics on the other, research on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation presents itself as a topic allowing or even necessitating an interdisciplinary perspective. In addition, such research will reveal relevant findings for, among others, historical linguists, dialectologists, contact linguists, and many other subdisciplines in the field. This book's first goal is therefore to help bridge the gap between these disciplines. Second, in order to enable *cross-linguistic comparison*, the book wants to bring together research carried out in different sociolinguistic constellations, as most obviously found in different language areas or different countries. Section 2 of this introductory chapter provides an overview of the most important literature, including a number of exceptions to the general characterisation that there has been little interaction between sociolinguistics and language acquisition research. Section 3 then discusses recent tendencies that have stirred research interest in the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation, to the extent that, starting around the year 2000, it emerged as an important research topic. The chapter ends with an outlook on the remainder of the book, a characterisation of present-day research and some perspectives for future research in Section 4.

2. Research on the acquisition of variation before 2000

2.1 General characterisation: Three important lines of research

Among the oldest texts describing and evaluating language variation in children are descriptions by educators reporting on the linguistic situation in which they had to work, or instructions by legislators or governments. As a result of standardisation processes, formal education often required children to learn to write in a language variety quite different from their native variety, which, in many historical cases, was conceived of as a different language. As oral endoglossic standards developed, alternatives to regional dialects for everyday interaction became available, and were propagated via the education system. Even though the number of everyday speakers of standard languages in Europe is estimated to have been minor before 1900 (Auer 2005: 17), 19th century documents clearly illustrate that non-standard varieties like regional dialects generally met with hostility in education. For instance, Hollingworth (1989: 294–295), in a discussion of the education system in 19th century Great-Britain, documents teachers' attitudes towards dialects as likely to interfere with learning the standard and associated with ignorance and social inequality. In addition, governmental policies to use the education system as a means to establish linguistic unity in the area under their rule were widespread

across Europe. An infamous document in this respect is Abbé Gregoire's (1794) *Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser la langue française* (Report on the necessity and the means to eradicate dialects and universalise the French language), which refers to mandatory training in French as a means to oust the linguistic variation that was seen as a threat to France's unity and its adherence to the ideas of the Enlightenment.¹ Similarly, 19th century Prussian education policies brought about a shift from Dutch to High German as the standard language in the parts of the Lower Rhine area under their rule, which is seen as the main cause for the subsequent loss of Low German dialects in everyday interaction (Cornelissen 1998).

Interestingly, the 19th century also saw a number of pleas in favour of the use of dialects as a language of instruction, with standard varieties being considered too unfamiliar to pupils or even "the new Latin" (Rosenberg 1989: 62), and dialects standing nearer to the 'essence' of language (also in a historical sense) and indexing purity and moral simplicity (Hollingworth 1989: 296–299). Hollingworth argues that most 19th century scholars advocating tolerance towards dialects did so on linguistically doubtful, essentialist grounds, indeed in a similar vein as many propagators of the standard, and are best considered manifestations of the Romantic movement (see Ammon 1989: 113–114 and Geeraerts 2003 for historical descriptions and Blom and Gumperz 1972 for a more recent case study from Norway). The same era also saw an increased focus on dialects in linguistics, and for the first time systematic attention is demanded for regional variation in the acquisition of sound systems (Schultze 1880: 45).² We are not aware, however, of any substantial empirical work or theorising on language variation in children from that era. It seems to be Bernstein (1971–1975) who, almost a century later, has to be credited for raising the interest in sociolinguistic variation as found in children and adolescents. Bernstein hypothesized that academic underachievement of lower social classes is due to their exclusive use of a so-called 'restricted code', whereas middle and upper class also have access to an 'elaborated code'. Although Bernstein resisted interpretations equating the restricted code with dialect, his work became

1. In his list of about 30 dialects Gregoire includes both Gallo-Romance varieties (Picardian, Normandian, Champenois, Bourguignon), Romance varieties more remotely related to French (like Occitan, Catalan), and non-Romance varieties like Breton, Alsatian, Flemish and Basque.

2. Schulze formulates it as follows: "es müssten die Beobachtungen nicht allein auf die Kinder verschiedenster Nationen ausgedehnt werden, sondern auch der Einfluß berücksichtigt werden, welchen auf die Entwicklung der Sprache eines Kindes der besondere Dialekt seiner Umgebung ausübt." Translation: The observations should not merely be extended towards children from a variety of nations, but the influence should be taken into account that the particular dialect of a child's surroundings carries out on the development of its language.

associated with the ‘deficit hypothesis’, which locates the reasons behind the lower classes’ academic underachievement in the socialization of the pupils rather than in the educational system (see Jones 2013 for discussion), and which was discarded by sociolinguists in favour of the ‘difference hypothesis’, which places central the “doctrine of equality” (Cheshire et al. 1989: 7) of different language varieties.

Bernstein’s work has inspired follow-up studies especially in educational research and also provoked intense discussion in sociolinguistics (Cheshire et al. 1989: 5–7), in which relevant hypotheses are formulated with respect to how sociolinguistic variation is acquired.³ In addition, the rise of the generative paradigm raised the interest in how aspects of grammar were acquired, also of non-standard varieties. Both in the educational and in the linguistic strands, a number of recurrent themes can be observed. As most research deals with situations in which a clear native variety can be distinguished, a logical first issue is the attainment in the second dialect (§2.2), which may be another regional variety (a situation dubbed ‘naturalistic’ second dialect acquisition by Siegel 2010) or a standard (in ‘educational’ second dialect acquisition). Second, along with the transmission of the varieties themselves, attitudes towards varieties are passed-on between generations (§2.3). As language variation often results from or lies at the cause of language change, a third logical question addresses the role children and adolescents play in initiating or pushing forward processes of language change (§2.4).

2.2 Second dialect acquisition and other attainment issues

A substantial part of the research on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation has focused on ‘attainment issues’, detecting whether or at which age children reach full proficiency in non-native varieties they are exposed to. Depending on whether such a non-native variety is learned in a school setting (the typical case being a standard variety) or in unmonitored conditions (typically in situations of speaker mobility), Siegel (2010) distinguishes between “educational” and “naturalistic” processes of second dialect acquisition. In many cases, however, the variety used in education plays a role in everyday interaction as well, so it is hard to maintain a clear-cut distinction between the two types.

In line with Bernstein’s work in the 1960s and 1970s, it has been observed time and again that mismatches between children’s native variety on the one hand, and standard or prestige varieties that tend to be dominant in school contexts on the

3. Despite the fact that Bernstein is mentioned in most contemporary handbooks in the field, sociolinguistic follow-up studies engaging in proper testing of his theories, about which most sociolinguists were highly critical, appear to be rather scarce (see Kerswill 2007: 58–59 for discussion).

other, may negatively affect children's chances on educational success. Differences between the varieties at play pervade the linguistic system, ranging from obvious domains like phonology and lexis that are most typically associated with non-standard language usage, over morphology and syntax, to pragmatics (Siegel 2010: 7–11). Example phenomena of the latter type include the organisation of narratives, topic development in conversation, or turn-taking mechanisms (see Hoyle and Adger 1998: 9–10 for discussion). Varieties may be in a situation of diglossia, as in the German speaking part of Switzerland (e.g. Stern 1988; Häcki Buhofer and Burger 1998; Ostermai 2000; Berthele 2002), or constitute a diaglossia, i.e. displaying a spectrum-like transition and involving intermediate varieties. Despite the fact that such contexts of diaglossia are believed to be the dominant linguistic repertoire in Europe and North-America (Auer 2005), and linguistic differences between varieties are often well-documented, the interest in how diaglossic patterns of variation are acquired seems to be quite recent (e.g. case studies like Rys 2007; Smith, Durham, and Fortune 2007; Katerbow 2013). Several approaches have been developed to deal with variation in the school context, some of which have focused on remedying linguistic disadvantages emanating from a non-standard linguistic background. Most educational problems associated with a non-standard background, however, appear not to result from any purely linguistic barrier. Of course linguistic differences between the home and the school variety can theoretically cause interference effects and misunderstandings (e.g. when non-standard speaking children have to acquire an orthography based on the standard variety; see Ammon 1989 for an illustration).⁴ But most investigations on the influence of dialect backgrounds in school converge on the conclusion that educational underachievement rather results from a negative social evaluation of non-standard language usage (e.g. Goodman and Goodman 1981; Rosenberg 1989; Kroon and Vallen 2009). In this respect, instead of (merely) remedial approaches targeting non-standard speaking pupils, sociolinguists have developed Language Awareness programs geared towards furthering knowledge about and acceptance of linguistic diversity in both teachers and pupils.

Even though most, if not all children are exposed to sociolinguistic variation from their infancy onwards, certain patterns of variation are acquired earlier than others due to developmental factors. In an attempt to take account of the importance of the age factor in the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation, Labov (1964)

4. The reverse, however, is also attested: Allerup et al. (1979) detect regions where children acquire better orthographical skills due to their dialect competence. In addition, bidialectism, i.e. proficiency in both a standard and a non-standard variety, is often found to correlate with educational success (Rosenberg 1989).

proposes a six-stage-model in which it takes children until late adolescence to acquire “the full range of spoken English”.

Stage 1, the basic grammar (before year 5): mastery of the main body of grammatical rules and the lexicon of spoken English, normally achieved under the linguistic influence of the parents

Stage 2, the vernacular (year 5–12): use of the local dialect in a form consistent with that of the peer group

Stage 3, social perception (early adolescence): progressive awareness of the social significance of the dialect

Stage 4, stylistic variation (late adolescence): learn to modify speech using standard forms in formal situations

Stage 5, the consistent standard: ability to switch to a consistent style of speech and maintain that style, acquired primarily by the middle class groups

Stage 6, the full range of spoken English: complete consistency in a range of styles appropriate, mostly achieved only by college educated persons with special interest in speech

In Labov’s model, even in situations of diagglossia typical for most parts of the US, children essentially acquire different varieties successively: it takes until adolescence before children are able to accommodate their language to the situation. Chambers (2003: 174), in contrast, assumes that different variants (and, hence, also varieties) can be acquired simultaneously, and asserts that “there are no studies indicating a time gap between the acquisition of grammatical competence and the development of sociolinguistic competence.” Despite Chambers’ claim, there are empirical studies supporting either view. For instance, Rys (2007) documents a radically improving dialect proficiency in Flemish adolescents, even in those reporting that the dialect is their native variety. Ervin-Tripp (1973) and Roberts (1994), in contrast, provide illustrations of sophisticated sociolinguistic competences in young children. In a discussion of two variants from a variety of Scots, Smith, Durham, and Fortune (2007: 89–90) attest both scenarios: the use of third person *-s* is acquired as a variable rule right from the start, whereas for the *hoose* variable, the youngest children show a categorical usage of the standard variant (see also Cornips, this volume, for a related example). Neither linguistic level, complexity, or age appears to explain this contrast. While we may hypothesize that such differences have to do with the structure of the input to which the children and adolescents are exposed, most investigations do not analyse the input in enough detail to be able to test such a hypothesis. From studies analysing young children who are exposed to a diversity of influences, it is known that they model their language not only after that of their parents, but also, and perhaps predominantly, on the language they