Sociolinguistic Variation in Children's Language

Acquiring Community Norms

How we vary our speech is fundamental in signalling who we are, where we're from and where we're going. How and when does such variation arise? Here, leading experts Jennifer Smith and Mercedes Durham address this question through a sociolinguistic analysis of the speech of preschool children in interaction with their primary caregivers. Bringing together two fields of linguistic research – variationist sociolinguistics and first language acquisition – the study uses qualitative and quantitative analysis of a range of variables to show when and how variation is acquired by young children and the effect the caregiver's interaction has on this process. In doing so, they tackle a fundamental question in language research: when and how do children acquire the highly complex patterns of variation widely attested in adult speech?

JENNIFER SMITH is Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Glasgow. Her research is in language variation and change, concentrating on the origins and development of dialect from infancy onwards.

MERCEDES DURHAM is Reader in Sociolinguistics at Cardiff University. Her research looks at how linguistic variation and language change are acquired, transmitted and viewed by individual speakers and across successive generations.

Studies in Language Variation and Change

Series editor: Sali Tagliamonte

Studies in Language Variation and Change is dedicated exclusively to books focused on sociolinguistic variation and the capacity of this area of research to interpret and explain systematic and inherent variation in synchronic and diachronic linguistics. The study of variation is concerned with the impact of language, culture and society in so far as these intersect with the structures and processes of linguistics. *Studies in Language Variation and Change* hosts books that focus on the details of linguistic structure in actual speech production and processing, or writing, including contemporary or historical sources.

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Jennifer Smith
University of Glasgow
Mercedes Durham
Cardiff University

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For Moira Smith
Mam
1942–2013

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We are indebted to so many people in writing this book: colleagues, students, friends, family.

We start with the key players in this study: the caregivers and children in Buckie. Quite simply put, this book would not have been possible without them. To allow a researcher into your home is one thing. To agree to record yourself and your child as you go about your everyday life is quite some other thing. We are extremely grateful to these twenty-nine caregiver/child pairs for their willingness to take on this task, allowing us to record them playing, scolding, eating, cuddling, laughing, crying.

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Preface

In the first few years of life, we are all on a steep learning curve: we learn to walk, tie our shoelaces, hold a knife and fork, count the ducks in the pond. Of all the things we accomplish in these early years, perhaps the most important is learning to talk. By around three years of age, we are able to tell our mummies we love them, say that we want to go to the green swing, explain where Dora the Explorer has been and complain that our brother has more sweeties than us. When and how we are able to acquire the complex sounds and structures of our language in such a short time is the subject of first language acquisition research. In order to unlock the secrets of this uniquely human ability, researchers working in this field have largely concentrated on the acquisition of standard varieties, where deterministic, or invariant, forms are the norm. At the same time, language is full of *variable* forms. There is not just one way of saying *butter*, but multiple ways. If a speaker is from North America they may say *bu*[ɾ]*er*, but in the British Isles they are more likely to say *bu*[ʔ]*er*. This same speaker might say *bu*[ʔ]*er* when conversing with a friend but *bu*[t]*er* when conversing with a teacher. Working out what varies where in speech and how is the subject of sociolinguistic research. If the goal of a child is to master the language they hear around them, then we need to know when and how children acquire not only invariant forms but also variable forms. We know that a child from Liverpool sounds Liverpudlian and a child from Philadelphia sounds Philadelphian. The question is when and how does such variation arise?

In this book we focus on this key question by bringing together two fields of linguistic research: first language acquisition and variationist sociolinguistics. We provide an analysis of the speech of preschool children in everyday interaction with their primary caregivers in a small community in north-east Scotland and compare this to general community norms. We examine a large number of variables taken from different areas of grammar, allowing us to demonstrate which types of variation are acquired at what developmental stage by the child, and what effect caregiver input has on this process. By doing this, we will track the emergence of structured variation by uncovering the *process* – acquisition of variation – that leads to the final *product* – variation in adult speech.

The book is organised as follows. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of some of the key findings on the acquisition of variation, where we show that although much has been learned, many questions remain. These questions provide the structure for the subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 concentrates on methodology, including a description of the research site and the key players in this study, the caregivers and their children. This chapter also lays out the analyses that will follow: what will be investigated across each variable and why. Chapter 3 provides a statistical analysis of the data as a whole: who speaks a little, who speaks a lot, and what types of activities best characterise these interactions? The next four chapters (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7) provide the main variationist analyses across numerous variables, where both social and linguistic constraints are investigated. The quantitative analysis of variation is a key methodology in this book. However, we also wanted to provide a 'feel' for the type of data we had collected: highly natural speech data of caregivers and children in everyday interaction that includes joking, playing, arguing, scolding and eating. For this reason, a substantial part of the book is devoted to describing the data, both in content and in style, through the use of often extended examples of interaction between caregiver and child. Chapter 8 brings together the findings in order to answer a fundamental question in the study of language variation and change: when and how do children acquire the highly complex patterns of variation, both linguistic and sociolinguistic, widely attested in adult speech?