

Department of English Studies, UCY
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Dr. Photini Coutsougera, Lecturer (Rm M008, e-mail: photini@ucy.ac.cy)
Office hrs: Wednesdays 1-3, Thursdays 3-5 (and by appointment)

Sound variation and change – child phonology

Sound variation

“Any of various phenomena involving departure from a single type of pronunciation for a linguistic form.” (Trask 1996: 372).

Where?

- Across different varieties of the same language
- Within the same variety spoken in a community

e.g. word-initial /h/ **dropping** in varieties of British English (e.g. Cockney, Liverpudlian etc.): [aus] instead of RP [haus], ‘house’

...or speaking in terms of **linguistic variables** (= unit with two or more variants): (h) has 2 variants in English, i.e. [h] and Ø.

Language in society

Society has an effect on language and social environment is reflected in it. In particular, sociological variables such as **social class** play an important role in language use mostly in western societies (e.g. Queen’s English in the UK) whereas **education** (see example from Teheran Persian / Farsi in Radford et al p. 54) appears to be the major factor influencing language use in non-western societies. Other crucial sociological variables can be **gender**, **ethnic group**, **age**, **social network links** etc.

But the language of the same individual can also exhibit variability. According to Bell (1984) we adapt our speech in accordance with our *addressees* and the *social context* we are in (*interactionally* determined variation).

Non-standard varieties of a language are very often incorrectly stigmatised as less pleasant, less sophisticated, incorrect etc. The fact that our value judgements are not based on aesthetics but on stereotypes (whether a specific variety is associated with a low status group, a rural area etc) is clearly shown in the following example:

pronunciation of preconsonantal /r/ in British English is looked down upon while it is undoubtedly regarded as prestigious in the US (r-less or non-rhotic New York varieties are stigmatised).

Sound change

A. Consonant change

Examples of consonant change in English:

Flapping (American, Australian, South African):

['pɪ:ɾ], ‘Peter’ (AE)

['pɪ:rə], ‘Peter’ (SA)

h - dropping (Cockney, Liverpudlian etc.):

[ænd] instead of RP [hænd], ‘hand’

Glottalisation (many different British varieties)

['bʌʔə] instead of RP ['bʌtə], ‘butter’

['ðæʔ] instead of RP ['ðæt], ‘that’

Below are examples from different varieties of English which have undergone various changes in connected speech downloaded from <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/shockey/downloads.htm>

more Flapping

[b__əv] bit of a (AU)

['bə__ən] but an (Scots)

['bə__ə] but I (AU)

['s__i] city (AE)

Devoiced Consonants

[__n] change

['mə__əs] images (AE)

[j__əs] years

ð-Assimilation

[__nni 'tæljən] on the Italian (AE)

[__nnæ__] in that

d-Deletion

[fr_ns] friends (Scots)

Palitalisation

[u_fil] do you feel ...

[suu_] suit you

Vocalised l

[b_ga_m] ball game (Dorset)

B. Vowel Change

See Kerswill P. & E. Torgersen (2004). *Internal and external motivation in phonetic change: Dialect levelling outcomes for an English vowel shift. Journal of Sociolinguistics, Volume 8 - Issue 1. pp. 23-.*

Child phonology

A. Acquisition of phonological contrasts according to Roman Jakobson (1941/1968)

1. Contrast between consonants and vowels, resulting in a CV syllable. The optimal contrast is between a maximal closure – a labial stop-, and a maximally open vowel: /pa/.
2. Contrast between nasal and oral stops: /p/ vs. /m/.
3. Contrast between labials and non-labials (dentals): /p, m/ vs. /t, n/.
4. Contrast between wide (low) and narrow (high) vowels: /a/ vs. /i/.
5. Contrast between
 - a. front and back vowels: /i/ vs. /u/; or
 - b. high and mid vowels: /i/ vs. /e/.

(Fikkert 2000: 224).

B. Phonological processes in child phonology (Smith 1973) – child (author's son) at age 2;6

Main characteristics of Smith's data: child still does not have onset clusters, which he reduces to simplex ones, generally allows only voiceless stops (neutralises voicing) and /n/word-finally (with a few exceptions), has predominantly oral and nasal stops in his inventory and very few instances of non-stop sounds such as w, s etc. See data on separate page.

Some phonological processes recorded by Smith (1973):

(the adult form is taken to be the input and the child's phonology is therefore seen as a mapping from adult English)

1. Nasal deletion before voiceless consonants

tent → [det]

2. Consonant deletion after nasals

mend → [men]

3. Consonant harmony

drink → [gik]

For a fuller picture and a thorough account of all phonological processes recorded by Smith (26 in total), please see Smith (1973) pp. 23 -31.

C. Acquisition of suprasegmental phonology

(Reference to acquisition of suprasegmental features was also made in I above)

Syllable structure processes

- final coda deletion
- cluster simplification (reduction)

Word-stress

- Stressed and final syllables are retained
- preference in trochaic stress patterns

Generally, children's productions evolve from universally unmarked structures to marked structures (those attested in their native language).

D. The Dual Lexicon Model: *“children are credited with two types of phonological representation, one corresponding to their perception of the word and the other determined by the set of distinctive features, syllable templates and so on over which they have mastery in production. Because there are two distinct sets of lexical representations, we will call such a model a dual lexicon model.” (Radford et al 1999: 113).*