Impact of Dialectal Variation on Preschoolers’ Acquisition of Questions

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Introduction

• **What is Mainstream American English (MAE)?**
  - dialect of English that most Americans speak.

• **What is African American English (AAE)?**
  - dialect typically used by working-class African Americans.

• Regional differences of AAE in different parts of the U.S. (e.g. New Orleans, Detroit, New York City, Chicago, etc.) (“Talking Black in America,” 2017).

• In more diverse and/or less segregated environments speakers combine features of both MAE and AAE.
Key concepts

• **Copula**: A word that links the subject of a sentence with a predicate.
  
  *He is a doctor*

• **Auxiliary**: word that often combines with to main verb to indicate tense and aspect:

  *She is jumping vs She has jumped*

• **Inversion Process**: Moving the auxiliary verb before the subject in a sentence; occurs in the formation of questions:

  *she is jumping → Is she jumping?*
Question-formation in MAE and AAE

- Speakers of MAE typically use the inversion process (in questions) while speakers of AAE do so less frequently (Green, 2007).
  e.g.: We almost done? (Green, 2011)

- Speakers of AAE delete auxiliaries and copulas (Wolfram, 2013).
  e.g.: what is he doing? \rightarrow what ø he doing? (auxiliary deletion; AAE)
  e.g.: who is she? \rightarrow who she? (copula deletion; AAE)
Question formation in children acquiring MAE and AAE:

• Theakston & Rowland (2009) and Rowland & Theakston (2009) used games to elicit auxiliaries in children 2;10- 3;6 (years;months) acquiring British English.

• Production of questions in young children acquiring AAE in segregated areas reflect adult AAE grammar (i.e. high rates of non-inversion and deletion of copulas and auxiliaries) (Green 2011).
Research Question

• NYC low SES preschoolers: *relatively less segregated*; acquire different varieties of English including MAE and varieties that slightly (Some Variation) or greatly (Strong Variation) differ from MAE (Barrière et al., 2018)

• → What is the pattern of acquisition of Yes/No and WH-questions in children exposed to different varieties of English?
Participants

• Data set 1: Narratives (Frog Story) N= 14; 3-5 year olds (Barrière et al, 2018)

• Data set 2: Hedbanz and Guess Who games  
  N= 8 ; 3;6-5 year olds

• Enrolled in Head Start/ Preschool with vouchers (low SES)

• No developmental issues; less than 10% exposure to Languages Other Than English

• 3 Groups: MAE, Some Variation, Strong Variation, determined based on Diagnostic of Language Variation Screener (DELV, Seymour et al., 2005)
**DELV Screener**

- Indicates the language variation status of the participant.
- Section 1: Focuses on phonology: sentence repetition
  - E.g. I see her brushing her teeth (MAE)/ teef (AAE).

Grammatical Section: sentence completion task

- 3rd person singular have/has:
  - Have/has; got is included.
  - He has (MAE) vs. He have/got (AAE)

- 3rd person singular -s, -es:
  - He sleeps (MAE) vs. he sleepø (AAE)

- 3rd person singular do/does:
  - He do/don’t (AAE) vs.
  - He does/doesn’t (MAE)

- Copula or (auxiliary) was, were:
  - They were (MAE) vs.
  - They was (AAE)
Tasks developed for this project

• Guess who and adaptation of Hedbanz: fosters the production of yes/no questions and wh-questions.

  ❖ *Guess Who? (figure 1)*

  • **Objective:** have the participants guess the person that each player has; cards represent the person that has to be guessed; opponents can only ask yes/no questions.

  ❖ **Adaptation of Hedbanz game (figure 2)** that involves 18 cards. 3 questions are allowed on each card: (e.g. *Is it a fruit/food? What shape/color is it?; Is it a thing?*)

  • The experimenter models yes/no questions or wh-questions with MAE structure (i.e. inversion; presence of copulas and auxiliaries).
Data Analysis

- Tasks 1-3 (*DELV screener*): scoring sheets; also audio-recorded (100% inter-coder reliability of 2/3 of samples).

- Tasks 4-5 (*Guess Who* and *Hedbanz*): audio-recorded and transcribed in the CHAT (CHILDES) (MacWhinney 2000) format (**figure 3**).
  - The program called CLAN was used to transcribe the data.

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**Figure 3**: CLAN (MOR). MOR gives an grammatical analysis.
Data Analysis

- Analyzes focus on structural characteristics of questions:
  - Also focuses on how often and whether there are changes in word order along with the production of the copula and the auxiliaries.
  - Similarities and differences between the acquisition of MAE, Strong Variation and Some Variation.

**KidEval (CLAN):** excel sheet that shows an output of total num. of auxiliaries, articles, copulas, utterances, etc.

**Combo (CLAN) (MAcWhinney, 2000):** shows an output of specific items; shows how often the participant produces it.
Results

❖ Confirm predictions re: rates of non-inversions:

❖ Strong Variation > Some Variation > MAE
Presence of Auxiliary and Copula in MAE, Some Variation and Strong Variation

- Confirm predictions re: rates of auxiliaries and copulas in questions:
  - MAE > Some Variation > Strong Variation
Broader Impact

• Study would help Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) and teachers to understand that there are different dialects in English.

• Making sure that the child is not diagnosed with a speech disorder when it is just a dialectal variation of a language.
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