



Research Article

The development of dialect classification across the lifespan

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the developmental trajectory of listeners' ability to perceive regional dialect variation in American English using a free classification paradigm. Listeners ranged in age from 4 years old through late adulthood. In two experiments, listeners sorted a set of talkers into groups based on where the talkers were from. Talkers from four regional dialects of American English (Midland, New England, Northern, Southern) were presented. The results showed that some of even the youngest listeners (4- to 5-year-olds) were able to separate New England talkers from talkers from other regions, providing evidence that they perceived dialect variation and exhibited some level of sociolinguistic competence. Moreover, children's dialect perception abilities showed incremental improvement through childhood and adolescence, with major developmental improvements in dialect classification accuracy observed in middle childhood (between the ages of 7 and 8 years), late childhood (between 11 and 12 years), and in the teenage years (between 15 and 16 years), when adult-like abilities were reached. The overall results have implications for the experimental methods suitable to gauge young children's sociolinguistic knowledge and for our understanding of the time course of children's development of sociolinguistic competence, particularly their acquisition of the social significance of linguistic variation.

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1. Introduction

Adult listeners use acoustic-phonetic information in the speech signal to identify talkers and orient themselves in relation to those talkers along social dimensions (Giles, 1970; Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999). They are able to identify a number of social characteristics of a talker, such as his or her social class (Labov, 1972), age (Koops, Gentry, & Pantos, 2008; Ptacek & Sander, 1966), and geographic background (Preston, 1993). Children in the process of learning their native language must learn how specific speech patterns are meaningful along these various social dimensions, in addition to acquiring the rest of their linguistic competence. In an early proposal about the development of sociolinguistic competence, Labov (1964) laid out a multi-stage developmental path that was quite protracted, with the final stages not being achieved until adolescence. Results from children's production of dialect features (Chambers, 1992; Jacewicz, Fox, & Salmons, 2011; Patterson, 1992; Roberts & Labov, 1995; Roberts, 1997) and their social evaluation of sociolinguistic variation (Giles, Harrison, Creber, Smith, & Freeman, 1983; Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013) have offered both supporting and conflicting evidence for the stages that Labov (1964) proposed. However, no single study has involved the systematic evaluation of children's sociolinguistic abilities from early childhood through adolescence, which is necessary to comprehensively examine the developmental stages proposed by Labov (1964).

The focus of the current study is the perception of one sociolinguistic variable, regional dialect. Adults are reasonably good at identifying talkers of different regions (Clopper & Pisoni, 2004a; Van Bezooijen & Gooskens, 1999; Yan, 2015), and they can use this information to place talkers into groups based on regional background (Clopper & Pisoni, 2007). However, previous work has found that children younger than 7 years old cannot reliably group talkers by regional dialect (Floccia, Butler, Girard, & Goslin, 2009; Girard, Floccia, & Goslin, 2008; Wagner, Clopper, & Pate, 2014) and little is known about the development of dialect perception through childhood and adolescence. The goal of the current study was to explore the development of listeners' abilities to group a set of unfamiliar talkers by dialect. Dialect perception by children spanning an age range from preschool through late adolescence was

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examined to assess the extent to which children's developing regional dialect perception follows the major stages suggested by Labov (1964).

1.1. Dialect perception by adult listeners

Previous research has shown that adult listeners can categorize talkers of their native language by regional dialect with above-chance accuracy. For example, Van Bezooijen and Gooskens (1999) found that native Dutch-speaking adults from the Netherlands were able to identify Dutch talkers by regional dialect and that British listeners could identify UK English talkers by local regional dialect. A study conducted in the Enshi prefecture in China showed that adult Mandarin listeners were able to accurately classify twelve talkers by county origin (Yan, 2015). Adult American English listeners can categorize fellow American English talkers with above-chance accuracy, although they do so only with broad regional category distinctions (e.g., Clopper & Pisoni, 2004b; Preston, 1993). Specifically, the dialect categories revealed by perceptual dialect categorization studies do not always correspond to the dialect divisions described in sociolinguistic or dialectology studies based on speech production. For example, Preston (1993) found that listeners categorized American English-speaking talkers from the eastern United States on the basis of a north/south distinction, despite documented evidence for distinct Northern, Midland, and Southern dialects in the target region (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006; cf. Davis & Houck, 1992). Similarly, Clopper and Pisoni (2004b) found that listeners consistently categorized American English-speaking talkers from the TIMIT corpus (Fisher, Doddington, & Goudie-Marshall, 1986) into three dialect groups that did not directly correspond to the TIMIT dialect labels. Although the selected TIMIT talkers were assigned to one of six regional dialects (New England, North, North Midland, South, South Midland, or West), presumably based on contemporary American dialectology research (e.g., Carver, 1987), the listeners in Clopper and Pisoni's (2004b) study categorized talkers into three broader groups, which roughly corresponded to a New England and Northern group, a Southern group, and a Midland and Western group.

Whereas the dialect categorization studies described above (and many other such studies) presented listeners with forced-choice classification tasks, Clopper and Pisoni (2007) used a free classification paradigm to investigate how differences in individual listeners' experiences and backgrounds influenced patterns of dialect perception. Their results showed that individually, many American English listeners were able to make more fine-grained distinctions about dialect group membership than the results from forced-choice categorization tasks had suggested. However, a cluster analysis of grouping responses across listeners showed that the broad dialect groups they perceived paralleled the pattern observed by Clopper and Pisoni (2004b) for the same set of TIMIT talkers: a New England group, a Southern group, and a general Midwest/West group, composed of North Midland, Northern, and Western talkers. The results of a second free classification experiment with a set of talkers from the Nationwide Speech Project corpus (Clopper & Pisoni, 2006) showed that even in the absence of accuracy differences, patterns of dialect perception were different between listeners from the Northern dialect region and listeners from the Midland dialect region (Clopper & Pisoni, 2007). Specifically, listeners from the Northern dialect region perceived Northern talkers as more similar to Midland, New England, and Western talkers, whereas Midland listeners perceived Northern talkers as most similar to Mid-Atlantic talkers. (Both talker and listener dialect regions in Clopper and Pisoni's (2007) study were defined following Labov et al.'s (2006) dialect divisions.) These results are consistent with work showing that listener residential history also affects forced-choice dialect categorization (Baker, Eddington, & Nay, 2009; Clopper & Pisoni, 2004b; Preston, 1993).

Taken together, the previous work demonstrates that adult listeners are generally able to classify talkers of their native language by regional dialect with reasonable accuracy, although listener dialect background may influence detailed grouping patterns. Relevantly for the current study, in which the majority of participants were from the Midwestern United States, results of multiple studies have suggested that New England and Southern talkers are perceived as particularly distinctive by adult Midwestern listeners, whereas Midland, Northern, and Western talkers are perceptually more similar to each other, often grouped together to varying degrees (Clopper & Pisoni, 2004b, 2007; Preston, 1993). The current study examined the developmental trajectory of children's ability to classify talkers by regional dialect, and when children acquire adult-like dialect perception skills.

1.2. Dialect perception by children

Labov (1964) proposed that children go through multiple stages on their way to developing adult-like sociolinguistic competence. Before the age of about 5 years old, he suggested that children are primarily focused on learning the basic grammar of their language from their parents, and their productive dialect use is expected to match their parents' dialect (i.e., their primary exposure source). Once children begin to interact with their peers in the neighborhood and at school (Labov's "Vernacular" stage), their own dialect use shifts to match their peer group, although this shift was argued to happen without the child's conscious awareness. Only as children age into early adolescence (Labov's "Social Perception" stage) do they come to explicitly appreciate the social significance of dialect variation among their friends and other talkers. More advanced skills in stylistic variation and conformity to a standard are acquired even later. Social context and familiarity, however, were also proposed by Labov (1964) as cross-cutting currents in children's sociolinguistic development. For example, in his examination of children's recognition of standard forms, he found that children from higher socio-economic backgrounds typically recognized the "adult prestige norm" at an earlier age than children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Labov (1964) was primarily interested in linguistic variation related to social class, but he framed his argument generally enough to apply to sociolinguistic variation of other types, including regional dialect variation. There is relatively little previous research on children's categorization of regional dialects, but the existing data points to protracted development throughout childhood and

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