The acquisition of variation and change in the quotative system:
A preadolescent perspective
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Interest in how children acquire and use sociolinguistic variables has been galvanized by increasing recognition that children are not merely passive acquirers of community speech varieties, but active participants in local linguistic norms (Roberts 2002, 2005). In learning these norms, children acquire stable patterns of variation, as well as those engaged in innovation, raising important questions about the role of children in the 'logistic incrementation' of language change (Labov 2007). To the extent that these questions have been addressed in the sociolinguistic literature, previous research has predominantly concentrated on children's acquisition of phonological variation (Labov 1989, Roberts 1997), resulting in a dearth of information about their acquisition of other variable features.

In this talk, I shift the focus away from phonological variation to patterns of discourse-pragmatic variation and change. Exemplifying with a study of the quotative system, widely recognized to be the locus of rapid language change (Ferrara and Bell 1995; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2007), I adopt a developmental perspective to track the acquisition of quotatives by Canadian children in the four to twelve-year-old age range. Systematic comparisons with adult quotative usage, supplemented by apparent- and real-time perspectives on the Canadian quotative system, enable children's role in sustaining discourse-pragmatic variation and change to be empirically characterized using an accountable quantitative methodology. Among the key findings of the investigation are the lability of sex effects associated with variant choice in preadolescence, as well as evidence of young children's participation in advanced trajectories of change. Taken together, the results indicate that fine-grained examination of children's usage can yield fresh insights into their contribution to advancing discourse-pragmatic change.

References

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