Dialect contact vs. second language acquisition: Developments in the relative marker system

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Winford (2003) suggests that the factors known to favour the selection of some variants over others during dialect levelling may be just as relevant in group second language acquisition, where minority linguistic groups form part of a larger host community and acquire the target language mainly through ‘natural’ informal second language acquisition within their friendship groups. This situation is typical of many modern cities where the population includes large groups of speakers of recent immigrant origin. Group second language acquisition can therefore affect the course of language change in an urban setting.

We analyse levelling of the relative marker system in adolescent speech in two different areas of London, one characterized by dialect contact, the other by group second language acquisition. We find striking similarities between the two situations. Compared to elderly speakers, adolescent speech shows a reduction of variant forms. The socially marked, nonstandard forms are lost (nonstandard what and the zero form in subject position) and the socially and linguistically unmarked form, that, dominates. Surprisingly, who remains stable, such that subject relativisers vary between who and that, whereas object relativisers show very little variation at all. We argue that internal factors can partly explain the survival of who. However, a discourse analysis of the use of who and that finds that speakers in the group second language acquisition situation have reallocated who/that variants to a new discourse function, marking topicality of the antecedent noun.

This confirms the relevance of a dialect levelling framework for understanding processes of group second language acquisition, whilst underlining an important aspect of group second language acquisition: the normative flexibility of that situation may allow speakers to exploit existing variation for new communicative goals. It also demonstrates the importance of taking account of discourse function when analysing syntactic variation.

References