

Dynamic Parameters of Influence: Stylistic Variation during the Early Lifespan

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While stylistic variation is characteristic of speakers regardless of age, the range of variation and the relative effect of different social and sociopsychological factors may shift over time. Unfortunately, little study has been done on the dynamic shifting of linguistic styles among children and early adolescents longitudinally. Many of the sources that affect the stylistic choices of adults (e.g., audience composition, personal identity, and the formality of the context) may also apply to children's style as well, but the relative influence of these factors cannot be assumed to be constant. Do particular social and sociopsychological effects have a greater or lesser effect as children get older? What is the relative influence of demographic, sociopsychological, and interactional factors, and how do they intersect in their correlation with stylistic variation?

This presentation utilizes a longitudinal dataset consisting of 70 African American children to investigate these questions. It evaluates the role of several social factors in young speaker's use of stylistic variation by assessing the stylistic manipulation of core features of African American English (AAE) at three temporal data points: Grades 1 and 2, Grade 6, Grade 8. To gauge their ability to shift their speech style, language samples from experimenter-controlled formal and informal contexts are compared. The analysis considers the influence of the child's sex, the mother's level of education, the percentage of the child's friends who are African American, the racial density of the child's school, and the child's self-reported racial centrality score. Analyses indicate that as children get older, the influence of peers and school factors may take on a greater importance in their linguistic choices. Looking at changes in style shifting and their relationship with various social factors helps identify which factors have a greater influence over the early lifespan and how they shift during childhood and adolescence.

References

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