Learning to Talk with Style: A Longitudinal Study of Style-Shifting in Early AAE

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Although there has been considerable sociolinguistic description and interpretive framing of stylistic shifting along the continuum of linguistic variation (Labov, 1972; Bell, 1984; Schilling-Estes, 2002; Coupland, 2008), there has been little attention to the development of stylistic variation in the early lifespan. When is stylistic shifting initiated in the lifespan and what kinds of linguistic variables are manipulated in earlier stylistic variation? Are there differential developmental trajectories of stylistic usage among children and adolescents during their early lifespan?

This presentation attempts to address these issues by utilizing data collected as part of a longitudinal study of African American English (AAE) and its relation to literacy skills in childhood and adolescence. The data from this study are unique to research on AAE, stemming from a relatively large sample size (N=70) of cohorts who were followed from infancy through the completion of high school. The data provide a rare opportunity to investigate speakers’ long-term trajectories of style and style shift, as most large-scale studies of dialect use have been restricted to data collected either during early childhood or well after children have acquired their native language. The analysis compares children’s linguistic behavior at the onset of schooling to their use of style and style shift in Grades, 6 and 8. It further examines whether shifting ability at the onset of schooling is correlated with later stylistic versatility. Finally, it compares individual speakers with group patterns of stylistic variation to determine the status of individual differences in early trajectories of stylistic variation. The results indicate that there is a wide range of variation in stylistic ability but a common core of features of AAE that are sensitive to stylistic variation. They also indicate that ability in stylistic variation correlates with success in conventional educational achievement.

References