Parents do matter in dialect acquisition: Evidence from the Kansai dialect of Japanese

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Most studies on dialect acquisition have focused on the acquisition of lexical items and segmental phonology, while details of parental influence have been left on the backburner as a settled issue. Stanford (2008) showed that children acquire the local paternal dialect rather than the maternal dialect through the categorization of identity groups based on culture, but his study failed to include children with non-local parents, making it impossible to evaluate the nature of the dialect that those children acquired.

His study will demonstrate that parental influences exist not only in lexical items but also in a phonological rule (PR). Furthermore, we will show counterevidence against Stanford’s cultural reasoning on dialect acquisition.

Kansai dialect (KJ) uses both tone and pitch. KJ is also equipped with the Tone Preservation Rule (TPR) which determines compound word tones based on initial lexical tones. To see the parental and locality effect, we combined these two factors and collected four types of KJ speakers, whose age ranges from 18 to 40. Our analysis shows 21 people with Kansai-born parents exhibiting 94.9% of the compatible tone with the initial lexical tone while 15 people with both non-Kansai area parents use the agreeable tone with the initial tone only 44.5% of the time. Interestingly, the latter speakers use the opposite tone on TPR. That is, they do have tones, but have not acquired TPR. The rest of the speakers with Kansai-born mothers show better TPR performance of 83.2%, while the speakers with non-Kansai mothers indicate 80.6% TPR performance.

These results demonstrate parental origins do matter in dialect acquisition, especially maternal influence with the TPR and dialect acquisition should not be simply treated as cultural difference. If influence from culture and peer could override the parental effect, we would not see the kind of distribution observed above.