

Science Research Proposal for Review Board

Dialect Acquisition in Adult Migrants to the Catskills

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1. Introduction

The proposed research deals with second dialect acquisition in adult migrants to the Catskills. When people move from one dialect-specific area to another, they often pick up some characteristics of that region's speech patterns.



The basic variable in sociolinguistic research is that there are two ways of saying the same thing (Labov 2008). Research on dialect acquisition is important to this vein of linguistics and to the science as a whole, as it examines how people change their manner of saying a given thing. The more that is known about how dialects are acquired, the more that can be learned about how they change. This in turn gives a clearer picture of how dialects and languages are formed and altered by social contact.

2. Background/Review of the Literature

Most studies in dialect acquisition focus on children. Up to about age 18, people are more receptive to learning a new language or dialect. Later learning is associated with “increasingly less native-like pronunciation” (M.J. Munro et al. 1999) .

Those that focus on adults, such as Flege (1995), have shown that changes in pronunciation are possible throughout a lifespan, but become increasingly limited as age increases. The notion of convergence as stated by Giles & Smith (1979) says that individuals tend to switch their speech styles to be more like those with whom they are interacting, regardless of age. It has been concluded from this that "adult migrants to a new dialect area [are] able to acquire some but not all of the features of the D2 [second dialect]" (Munro et al. 1999). The concept of a sensitive period for language and dialect acquisition early in the lifespan was first put forth by Oyama (1976).

Dialect acquisition has been studied in several ways. Chambers (1992) used the method of collecting speech samples from a migrant Canadian group residing in England and a native British group and comparing the percentages of specific phonological features in the two groups. Amount of acquisition in this study was

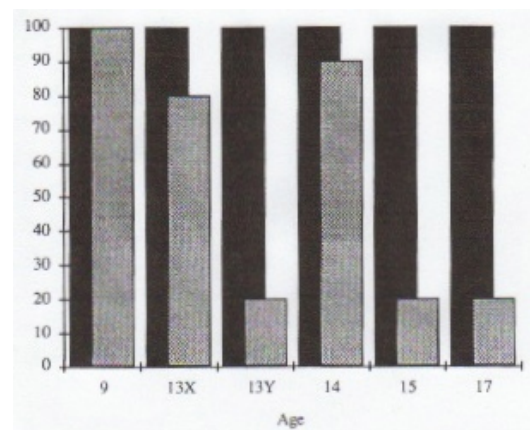


Fig. 1: Graph of acquisition from Chambers (1992)

quantified by measuring percentages of certain dialectal features in the immigrant children’s speech. It was noticed that the older children (ages 15-17) had very low percentages of measurable dialect acquisition, as seen in Fig. 1 (gray bars represent migrants, black bars represent natives). However, it was apparent that they had acquired the British dialect to some degree. It was clear that, though they had not acquired the dialect under close linguistic analysis, they still *sounded* like they had acquired it.

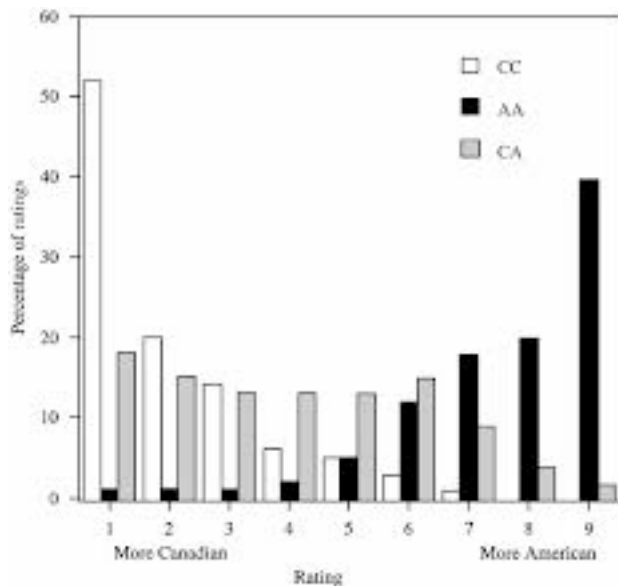


Fig. 2: Perceptual acquisition from Munro et al. (1999)

Munro et. al. (1999) studied second dialect acquisition with a different method. This study accounted for the fact that adult immigrants into an area will begin to sound like the inhabitants of that area, regardless of how much they have actually “linguistically” acquired it. This required the use of a perceptual study. The perceptual method is

common in L2 (second language) research, notably Flege et. al. (1995). This was the first study to employ it in D2 (second dialect) research. The basic methods consist of eliciting speech samples from one immigrant speaker group and one native speaker group. The samples are then played in a randomized order to natives, who are asked to rate how close to their own speech the speakers sound. For example, Munro et. al. asked native Canadians and native Alabamans to rate speech samples on a scale of 1 to 9 in terms of how close or far from their own speech the samples were. The immigrants were generally rated

around the 3-5 mark, showing partial perceptual acquisition. In Fig. 2, the gray bars represent these immigrant subjects.

Research on dialect acquisition has not been applied to the Catskills region and its dialect, which was studied by Birns (1986) and shown to share characteristics of Appalachian “Mountain Speech.” Despite this, many sociolinguistic studies (Dinkin 2009) completed today still include the Catskills as part of the Hudson Valley dialect region. Based on the evidence collected by Birns, this is a faulty assumption.

Grammatical constructs and lexical replacements are more likely to be picked up than pronunciation shifts, especially by adults (Chambers 1992). An example would be saying the word “soda” rather than “pop.” One “Mountain Speech” characteristic shown by Birns (1986) to be present in the Catskills is double prepositioning, as in “going over to Walton.” Birns studied only grammatical items in his survey of the Catskills.

3. Rationale

The specific question being addressed by the research is:

How much of the Catskills dialect are permanent migrants from downstate New York perceived by natives to exhibit in conversational speech?

The sociolinguistic model which states that migrants to a dialect area pick up some but not all of the region’s dialect will be evaluated here.

Mutual intelligibility is the concept that two speakers can understand each other even though they are speaking different dialects or languages. This is rarely a factor with most dialects of American English, but it may also play a role in migrant acquisition. Another more likely factor is desire to blend in and be accepted by the community. How much a migrant embraces the culture and people of the Catskills will influence how much of the dialect they acquire.

Hypothesis: If the speech of adult downstate migrants to the Catskills is rated by adult natives of the region, they will be perceived to have partially acquired aspects of Catskill dialect.

Confirmation of this hypothesis will show that Catskill dialect has been acquired by the transplants heavily enough for Catskill natives not to see their speech as totally foreign. Additionally, more will be added to the understanding of how age and LOR (length of residence) correlate to perceptual acquisition.

Birns, in his study of the Catskills dialect, tested only for the presence of Appalachian grammatical features in Catskill natives. It was decided that tabulating the presence of Appalachian grammatical features in the speech of migrants would be difficult and might not be a good measure of acquisition, as it does not account for the acquisition of phonological features. This led to the use of a perceptual method similar to the one used by Munro et. al. (1999).

4. Method and Design

Method:

The data will be collected through elicitation of spontaneous speech samples from two sample groups. These will consist of both samples from sociolinguistic interviews or narration of a picture story, both of which are commonly used for the purposes of eliciting conversational speech. Clips from the recordings will be isolated, labeled, and played back in a randomized order to a second test group of Catskill natives, who will be asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 9 how “Catskill” the speakers sound.

A central problem in sociolinguistic research, as in any research dealing with human behavior, is the "Observer's Paradox," which states that if the subject knows that he or she is being observed, the subject will not provide a reliable sample of their normal speech patterns. However, it is an important ethical concern that the subject is not deceived as to the purpose of the research.

Therefore, a middle ground must be found between the fact that the subject must know they are being surveyed but not talk like they are being surveyed. As the research focuses upon how migrants to the Catskills adjust to their surroundings, this is an acceptable ostensible purpose for the project. The downstate subjects will be told that they are participating in a study about how migrants to the Catskills have adjusted to their life here. Natives will be told they are being interviewed about their life in the area. Adults are being used because it is generally not standard practice in dialect acquisition studies due to the sensitive period for acquisition mentioned above.

The criteria for migrant subjects are as follows:

- The subject must be over 25 years old.
- The subject must have lived in the Catskills for a minimum of 5 years.
- The subject must have been born and have grown up in the downstate Metropolitan New York area (including Long Island, New York City, and the lower Hudson Valley starting with Putnam and Orange Counties).
- The subject's first language must have been English, as second-language acquisition can affect second-dialect acquisition.

For natives:

- The subject must be over 25 years old.
- The subject must have been born in or near the Catskills (This includes the area defined by Delaware, Greene, Sullivan, and Ulster Counties.)
- The subject must have lived in the Catskills until at least age 18.
- The subject must currently reside in the Catskill area and must identify themselves as a Catskill native.

Design:

Questions in sociolinguistic interviews are meant to bring subjects to a place of comfort or interest, where they are so engrossed in what they are talking about that they do not think about how they sound. Examples include hobbies or childhood memories, but as the ostensible purpose of the interview is adjustment to Catskills life, that must factor in majorly to the content of the questions as well.

Sample Questions:

For the migrants:

- When did you move to the Catskills?/How long have you lived here?
- How do you like it here?
- How often do you return to your hometown?
- Tell me about the house you grew up in/your high school/your hometown.

For the natives:

- Where were you born?
- Where did you go to school?

For both groups:

- What are your hobbies/interests?
- How long have you been interested in (hobby)?
- Has moving here affected your hobby?

Any cues to subject interest may be picked up on and pursued if the subject shows a great interest in a given topic.

The migrant subjects will also be asked to complete a brief written survey which measures how much contact they have with Catskill natives. This consists of several multiple-choice questions which measure how many close friends and coworkers the subjects have who are Catskill natives. They will be asked to quantify this in increments of 0-5, 6-10, 11-15 et cetera. The third question is “Do you think you speak differently from people who were born here?” The subjects will be informed of the actual purpose of the study after the sample is elicited.

Procedure:

The subject will be asked if they are interested in participating in a survey of how adult migrants to the Catskills have adjusted to life here. They will be told that they are going to be asked a few questions about their life here, but do not need to divulge any private information if they do not choose to do so.

The subjects will also be informed that the interview is being recorded but that they do not need to treat it as an interview, rather as a conversation. This will be helped by the fact that some of the subjects tested will be people who the interviewer has a preexisting relationship with and so will be more inclined to speak conversationally to. They will be given no more information about the subject being researched. They will only have to answer the questions presented to them and will not be asked to do anything other than talk.

Analysis:

The native speakers' ratings will be analyzed to measure level of acquisition. The percentage of each rating for both natives and non-natives will be calculated and graphed. This will show what percentage of Catskill and non-Catskill ratings were assigned to each group. Histograms will be made to show what correlation, if any, exists between percentage of ratings and length of residence (LOR) in the Catskills. Each individual's ratings will be tabulated to show the distribution and frequency of ratings. This may also be shown to correlate with age, as well as level of education. Acquisition of this particular dialect, which is generally stigmatized as low-status, may depend heavily on level of education.

Reliability of the data will be most likely tested through calculation of p values, which are used by Munro et. al. (1999) and countless other studies involving linguistic survey. Inter- and intra-rater reliability will also be analyzed with statistical calculations such as Pearson r correlations.

5. Significance and Conclusion

The study is novel because the results may strengthen certain perceptions about how dialects are acquired by adults, which is a relatively unexplored linguistic territory. It may be shown that the subjects who were older upon moving to the Catskills picked up less of the dialect, or that LOR has a greater effect upon perceived acquisition than age of migration.

The study has a social implication beyond its contributions to the field of D2 acquisition.

Because it deals with the speech accommodation and acquisition of migrants from an urban area to a rural one, attitude toward the rural culture is an important factor in deciding how much acquisition occurs. There is a social conflict in the Catskill region between the two groups, and many members of both groups harbor negative feelings towards one another. This study will help to investigate how that conflict influences social interaction, specifically speech patterns.

It is important that more studies are done on adult dialect acquisition because it is a key factor in the study of dialect change. If many experiments like this one are performed, a clearer picture will take shape of dialects are acquired, how they spread, and how they disappear or morph into new dialects.

This study adds to the body of knowledge on dialect acquisition. Studies on dialect acquisition help to explain just how and why changes in dialect and language happen. By studying adults we can also gain a greater understanding of how immigration affects dialect formation. This is an important linguistic concern and aids in our perceptions of how language and dialects change.

6. References

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