

Child acquisition of variable (-t, -d) clusters in Standard Jamaican English at school

This paper explores production of /-t/ and /-d/ in word-final consonant clusters by 7-year-old Jamaican schoolchildren, who learn Standard Jamaican English (SJE, Irvine 2005) in school as a second variety.

Variationists argue that preschool children exhibit inherent variation, acquiring linguistic forms simultaneously with variable patterns and constraints (Roberts 2002). Developmental phonologists have shown that they exhibit both lexical and segmental awareness, and an incremental mastery of complex linguistic patterns (Foulkes et al. 1999). Meade's (2001) developmental study of rural Jamaican children (aged 1;6–4;6) observes significant individual variation in the development of their phonological repertoire; e.g., cluster reduction is produced inconsistently at age 4;6. Meade's findings support Guy & Boyd's (1990) argument that (-t, -d) variability evolves over a long process of acquisition: the constraints on deletion found in adult speech are only partially acquired by the age of 7 (Labov 1989), in step with adult-like structural analyses (Roberts 1995).

For 24 Jamaican children aged 7, we examine the level of mastery of the phonological constraints on /-Ct, -Cd/ realization, and the complex relationship between those constraints and the underlying forms, word frequency, and sensitivity to lexical conditioning. Data were gathered from 3 rural schools in 2005 (4 boys, 4 girls per school, all year 2), across 5 stylistic contexts. In a preliminary analysis of 8 children's speech, the rate of /-Ct, -Cd/ retention ranges from 11-38% (mean 29%, $n = 644$).

Little is known about acquisition of variable phenomena in later childhood via schooling, and Creoles are no exception. Research on urban adult speakers of Jamaican Patwa (Patrick 1999) found typical cross-dialectal phonological factors constrain a deletion process operating over widespread English-like underlying forms. However, some JP forms were cluster-less, in contrast to English equivalents. Many more forms might be so for young rural speakers. Devonish & Harry (2004) claim that for (-Ct, -Cd) JP allows only /-nt/ and /-lt, -ld/ clusters; all others produced by JP-dominant speakers are the result of 'conversion rules' targeting SJE, accompanied by hypercorrection.

We first analyse classroom speech in classic variationist perspective, with a twist: the assumed process is insertion of final (-t, -d) into SJE items, rather than deletion. The default hypothesis is that the same general contextual phonological constraints apply as to deletion (Labov 1989, Santa Ana 1991, Guy & Boberg 1997). However, we consider two possible explanations for why these may not robustly constrain the data:

- (1) the children frequently hyper-correct, ignoring linguistic constraints as they over-generalize (-t, -d) insertion;
- (2) the children frequently apply a whole-word approach to acquiring SJE, rather than (or alongside) a segmental rule-based one. (This explanation exhibits parallels with lexical diffusion mechanisms in non-targeted sound change; Bybee 2002.)

Our analysis raises the important question: How can variationist methods best model a complex acquisition situation in which

- both segmental processes of variation and lexically-based variation affect the same features, while
- deletion and insertion processes coexist in both the vernacular L1 and the targeted standard, for different lexical entries?

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