

## **Acquisition of a traditional morphosyntactic variant by Acadian French children**

This paper presents research on the acquisition of a morphosyntactic variable by pre-adolescent children. It analyzes the acquisition of third person plural subject-verb agreement in a variety of Acadian French spoken in the Acadian Peninsula region of Canada. This variable has a traditional variant, the morpheme *i-V-ont* that has double marking (as in *les enfants i-jou-ont* "the children are playing") and that is associated with closed network speakers; two other variants,  $\emptyset$ -*V- $\emptyset$*  and *i-V- $\emptyset$*  (as in *les enfants  $\emptyset$ -jou-ent* and *les enfants i-jou-ent*), are used by both open and closed network speakers. The focus of the paper is on variation in the acquisition of the traditional variant.

Data are the elicited speech of 24 schoolchildren from a small rural community. The children, aged from 4 to 12 years, represent three age groups, two types of home background (closed and open network) and both genders. The comparison group of adults includes 16 speakers stratified by age, gender and type of social network.

Considerable differences in children's use of the traditional variant are observed between the two social network types, which is expected given the social stratification of the variable among adult speakers. Variation among children from closed network families shows a steady approximation across the three age groups to adult patterns. However, internal factors, in particular the type-of-verb-stem factor, show patterns that differ from those observed in the usage of the adult speakers.

Results are discussed in terms of the transmission problem (Labov 2001) and suggest that children effect a re-analysis or re-organisation of the data provided by adults. The results also contribute to our knowledge (Kerswill 1996, Roberts 2002) of the trajectory along which children acquire variation patterns.

### References

- Kerswill, P. 1996. Children, adolescence, and language change. *Language Variation and Change* 8: 177-202.
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- Roberts, J. (2002) Child language variation. In J.K. Chambers, P. Trudgill & N. Schilling-Estes (eds) *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*. Malden MA: Blackwell. 333-48.