

Children's Use of Cajun English in Southeastern Louisiana

Janna B. Oetting & April W. Garrity

Cajun English (CE) can be distinguished from other southern English dialects based on the frequency at which a particular set of phonological and morphosyntactic patterns are produced (Dubois & Horvath, 1998; in press). The purpose of the current study was to examine whether children with Cajun flavoring in their speech produced higher rates of CE patterns than children without flavoring. We also asked if CE pattern use would vary as a function of whether a child presented strong (i.e., normal) versus weak (i.e., impaired) language ability.

The data were language samples from 40 African American children and 53 white children, aged four to six (total utterances in dataset = 20,171; Oetting & McDonald, 2001; 2002). A third of the samples were from children classified as language impaired; the others were from normal age-matched and language-matched controls. All children produced a rural version of either Southern White English (SWE) or Southern African American English (SAAE) as documented by transcript analysis and listener judgments (completed by Ph.D. students blind to the age, race, gender, and language status of the children); 33% of these samples (18 from SAAE speakers and 13 from SWE speakers) were perceived by the listeners as presenting Cajun flavoring.

Using Dubois and Horvath's work and cross-linguistic studies of childhood language impairment, we examined the transcripts for six phonological and five morphosyntactic patterns (i.e., monophthongization, non-aspirated stops, vowel nasalization, interdental fricatives, glide weakening, vowel lowering, was leveling and zero marking of regular past, is, are, and regular third person). Zero was and were also were examined as control patterns. It was predicted that the children who presented Cajun flavoring would produce higher rates of the CE patterns (but not the two control patterns) than those who did not. It was also predicted that the children with language impairments would produce the zero-marked morphosyntactic patterns and the control patterns but not the other CE patterns at higher rates than those with normal language ability.

For nonCajun speakers, 47% produced at least one phonological pattern whereas 87% of the Cajun speakers met this criterion. Zero is, are, and regular third person also were produced by the Cajun speakers at higher rates than by the nonCajun speakers (omission of *is*, 38% vs. 22%; omission of *are*, 61% vs. 39%; omission of 3rd person marker *-s*, 56% vs. =37%). These findings held even when we examined the SWE samples separately from the SAAE samples. When children with and without a language impairment were compared, no differences were found for Cajun phonology or was leveling. Cajun speakers with language impairments, however, produced higher rates of zero is, are, was, were, and regular past than did their normal Cajun English-speaking peers.

These results indicate that young children, both normal and language impaired, are sensitive to the distributional properties of their native dialect. Nevertheless, strong and weak learners of Cajun English can be distinguished from each other based on a subset of verb-related morphemes.

References

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