Salience and the acquisition of indicators, markers and stereotypes in a Scottish dialect

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One of the key concepts in sociolinguistic research is the demarcation of linguistic variables into three categories: stereotypes, markers and indicators (e.g. Labov 1972). These correlate with speaker awareness of forms: markers and stereotypes exhibit style shifting on the formal/informal continuum but indicators do not. The question is ‘Why exactly are speakers more aware of some variables than others?’ (Trudgill 1986:11). In an attempt to answer this question, Trudgill (1986), amongst others, appeals to the notion of salience. Key to this idea is that a number of linguistic and social principles can be called upon to predict salience in any given community of speakers. Salient variables are predicted, amongst others, to be: overtly stigmatized; undergoing change; morphological rather than phonetic; have radically different variants. However, results to date on whether these principles are reliable predictors of salience are mixed (e.g. Kerswill and Williams 2002).

In this paper we examine the use of indicators, markers and stereotypes in a large scale corpus of 26 caregiver/child dyads (130 hours fully transcribed, 700,000 words). Following Labov (2001), we suggest that the multifaceted roles assumed by caregivers in daily interaction with their child – teacher, playmate, disciplinarian – provides a good test site for style-shifting across a range of contexts of use, and may help us establish what is salient and what is not in this group of speakers. We target a range of variables which differ according to the criteria proposed for salience, as in (1-4): some are stigmatized, others are not; some are undergoing change, others are stable; some have radically different variants, others do not; some are phonetic/lexical, others morphosyntactic.

(1) I’ll just count these. Look at this big ains. (Luke, 3;5)
(2) My paints are in here. Is there pens in there? (Lucy, 3;4)
(3) But every one’s a h[ʌ]se. Every one’s a little h[u:]se. (caregiver)
(4) I dinna want to play with Zachary. I don’t want a lion. (Ellen, 2;10)

Analysis of over 15000 contexts of use across different styles: teaching and discipline (formal), and play and daily routine (informal) reveals that, both in the caregiver and child speech, there is style-shifting with some variables, but not with others. In other words, some are indicators and others are markers in this speech community. Further, the predictors of salience are borne out with some of the variables, but not with others. For example, some of the variables examined have very distinctive variants, but not all of these exhibit style-shifting. The phonetic/lexical variables analysed exhibit style-shifting, but the morphosyntactic variables do not. These mixed results suggest that using predefined criteria as predictors of salience may be problematic as ‘salience, however defined and however caused, will be different for different social groups’ (Kerswill & Williams 2002:86).

