

Delete *do*, non /u:/, one or two?

The loci of inherent variability in children

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Inherent variability is pervasive in speech, but where - and how - is this variation located in a speaker's grammar?

In this talk, I suggest that examining the processes by which variation is acquired by young children may enable us to answer this question.

My data come from the speech of 29 pre-school children (2;10-4;2) in interaction with their primary caregivers from a small community in north east Scotland, as in the extract below:

Caregiver:	Fa was you playing with the day at playgroup, like?
Child:	Iona and Megan.
Caregiver:	Was you playing with Megan as well, was you?
Child:	Aye.
Caregiver:	Aye. Had you good fun?
Child:	Aye....there's nae climbing frame!
Caregiver:	Fit way no?
Child:	Cos there's nae.

Analysis of a series of variables taken from the phonetic, phonological, morphological and syntactic levels of grammar demonstrates that some variables show systematic linguistic and social constraints on use from the start of the acquisition process, while others show a delay in adult-like attainment of variable forms. Why should these variables behave differently?

The results suggest that the mechanisms underlying variation arise from fundamentally different operations in the grammar: innate properties of the language faculty explain the early acquisition of some variables, while a usage-based model, based on caregiver input in mediation with the standard language, explains the delayed acquisition of others.

I discuss how these initial processes of acquisition in young children can provide clues to the loci of inherent variability we see in later life.