



CLLEAR seminar series

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How the glottal stop starts: examining children's use of a rapidly expanding variable

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Glottal replacement is 'one of the most dramatic, wide-spread and rapid changes to have occurred in British English in recent times' (Trudgill, 1999:136). While much is known about the progress of this change through time and space in adult and adolescent speech, far less is known about how this variable is first acquired and how it subsequently develops in the speech of young children. In order to address this gap, in this paper we conduct an analysis of glottal replacement in the speech of children in a community in north east Scotland. Our previous research shows, not surprisingly, that this form has undergone rapid change in the adult population (Smith & Holmes-Elliott 2017). Here we focus on the speech of children - first as preschoolers (aged 2;10-4;2) in everyday interaction with their caregivers, and later as preadolescents (aged 11-13) - in order to reveal how this change in progress is first acquired and how it develops in later childhood. Specifically, we investigate two questions: 1. transmission from caregiver to child in the preschool years and 2. how the change develops with further language socialization and maturation in preadolescence.

We first start with the question of 'transmission' of this variable from caregiver to child (Labov, 2007:346). Given its stigmatized profile (e.g. Wells 1982:35), glottal replacement may be a key focus of concern for caregivers in Child Directed Speech (e.g. Foulkes et al., 2005, Smith et al 2013) as highlighted in Extract 1 between Charlie (2;10) and his caregiver Amy:

Extract 1

Amy: Do you want jam and butter on here, Charlie?
Charlie: Yeah.
Amy: Jam and butter on your toast?
Charlie: Jam and bu[?]er.
Amy: What is it? What is it darling?
Charlie: What Mummy?
Amy: What would you like?
Charlie: Bu[t]er.
Amy: Bu[t]er. That's right.

How does such overt social condemnation correlate with actual language use between caregiver and child in early language socialization? And how does this fit into the broader picture of more general developmental constraints in the crucial stages of language acquisition?

We then compare the children's preschool use to their use in preadolescence, as in Extract 2 from Lucy, aged 12:

Extract 2

Well, I ken how to do i[ʔ] on the iPhone, bu[ʔ] I would na ken how to do it like-- tell you fae tha[ʔ]. But there's usually like a li[ʔ]le bu[ʔ]on on your se[ʔ]ings and then it's like your Facebook, but then you can like change i[ʔ].

Quantitative analysis of over 4000 variable contexts shows that there are key differences between preschool and preadolescence in the use of glottal replacement in both rates and constraints on use. These differences can be attributed to 1. articulatory constraints resulting from the stage of acquisition, and 2. different patterns of language socialization in these two defining periods of childhood. Thus language socialization and language development interact in pushing up these rates of use from preschool to preadolescence. Further, preadolescent rates of glottal replacement are higher than that of adult norms - from being laggards in their preschool years, these speakers are leaders in preadolescence.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that the interaction of language socialization and developmental factors are key driving forces in the transmission of variation from caregiver to child and subsequent development in later years.

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