

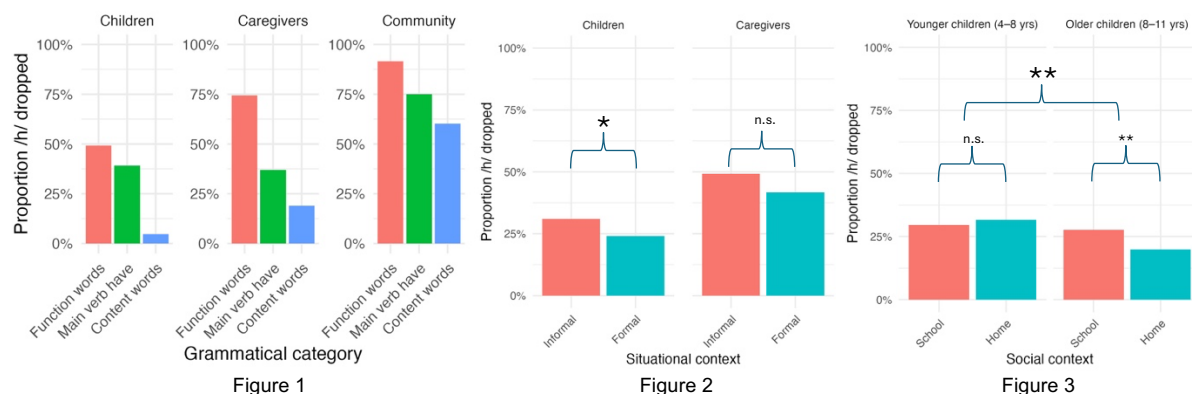
Leaving ‘ome be’ind: tracking children’s acquisition of a sociolinguistic variable using home, school, caregiver and community speech

Background: Within the field of developmental sociolinguistics, research in recent years has spoken to the question of how children, “attain adult-like communicative competence,” [1, p. 3] and more specifically *when* and *how* children learn to condition variation in their own speech on the same grammatical and social contexts as others in their speech community. We build on this work by interrogating the development of style shifting. The study tracks children’s use of a sociolinguistic feature known as “H-drop”, the omission of syllable-initial /h/ in speech [2, p. 297]. Although H-dropping can occur in function words in most dialects of English, it is permitted more widely in many urban working class British dialects [3, pp. 353–4], including that of the *Black Country* [4, p. 121].

Methods: Fourteen children (4;03-10;09 years, 7 female) growing up in the Black Country were recorded playing two games designed to elicit formal and informal speech across two social contexts; at school with the researcher and peers, and at home with caregivers. Caregiver speech was also recorded and analysed, and a sample of adult sociolinguistic interview data (n=12) provides a community baseline against which to compare child and caregiver speech. Auditory analysis was conducted on 4832 tokens of syllable initial /h/.

Results: Figure 1 shows the overall rates of h-drop for children, their caregivers and the community. All groups show the same broad hierarchy of grammatical patterning, which has been successfully transmitted to children. However, caregivers use the feature much less frequently in CDS than the community baseline (p=***), and children do so even less than their caregivers (p=*). Figure 2 shows the situational context effect (formal vs. informal), which is robust for both younger (4-8ys) and older children (8-11ys). This effect does not reach significance amongst caregivers. Figure 3 shows the social context effect (school vs. home). Only the older children show a robust difference, dropping /h/ more at school than home.

Discussion: These findings show that stylistic /h/ variation emerges first along the informal-formal continuum, with variation according to environment and interlocutor (school vs. home) emerging later. We discuss this finding in light of a number of developmental factors, including the Labovian principle of developing outward orientation [5], where interlocutor-based social distinctions may become relevant later in childhood.



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