

**Title: How 9-11-year old children in a London suburb use and perceive phonetic variation.**

This paper presents findings from a project investigating the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in 9–11-year-old children. We focus on a state primary school in southwest London, using interview data from 42 pupils (20 girls; 11 bi/multilingual; 34 middle class) to examine: (1) what socio-cultural meanings children infer from accent variation, and (2) how they use phonetic variation themselves. Of particular interest is the role of local context in acquisition and whether children’s sociolinguistic skills are shaped by living in a suburban and middle-class community where standard features may have emphasised value (Dickson and Hall-Lew, 2017).

Data collection began with 6 weeks of informal fieldwork followed by semi-structured interviews conducted in groups of 3. The interviews explored the socio-cultural meanings children associate with 3 local accents: Southern Standard British English (SSBE), Popular London English (PLE) and Multicultural London English (MLE). Prior to each interview, participants completed a task at home where they were asked to listen to an audio clip of either an SSBE, MLE or PLE speaker and draw or write what they thought the person was like (age, appearance, personality, job etc.).

To investigate children’s awareness of social meaning in speech, transcripts of interview data were analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo (Version 14, 2023). Whilst the responses to the MLE speaker showed little consistency across groups, clear patterns emerged in children’s evaluations of the SSBE and PLE speaker, with the former evaluated as kind, intelligent, and well-spoken (“I feel like they speak nicely”), whilst the latter was evaluated as not friendly, not intelligent, and badly spoken (“They’re not pronouncing it properly”). We argue that these evaluative indexical meanings - which are not typically seen until adolescence (Labov, 1964) – are present in our sample because of the roles that SSBE and PLE variants play in the local community. In particular, SSBE is valued as a means of linguistic capital, whilst PLE is stigmatised and overtly discouraged by adult figures (“They’re not doing their T’s or F’s.” ; “There’s people there that speak like this and my mum absolutely hates it.”).

An auditory-acoustic analysis was conducted on the audio-recorded interview data with the aim of characterising the accent features in this community and seeing whether children’s production is shaped by their evaluations of SSBE and PLE. To do this, we focus on the use of /t/-glottaling, TH-fronting, //vocalisation and alveolar ING in a subset of 16 speakers (7 female; 10 middle class). Findings indicate that, despite children’s negative evaluations of PLE accent features, the overall rates of non-standard variation are as expected for speakers from the south-east and do not reflect a tendency towards hypercorrect usage. In comparing the factors known to constrain variation and acquisition (social class, gender and age), the largest difference in usage rates is between the middle class and working-class participants for three out of four variables (TH-fronting, //vocalisation and alveolar ING). In other words, middle class children are producing higher rates of standard variation in comparison to their working-class peers. Although this pattern is not new to sociolinguistic research, these findings reinforce the idea that, for children in this community, the most meaningful sociolinguistic distinction is the one between middle-class SSBE speakers and working-class PLE speakers.

At a time in the UK when inequalities have become more polarized (The Equality Trust, 2023), these findings show us the value of working with middle-class communities to understand how social distinctions are maintained, whilst emphasizing the important role that social class plays in acquisition – affecting what variants children acquire and how they evaluate and perceive other speakers.

## References

Dickson, V., & Hall-Lew, L. (2017). Class, Gender, and Rhoticity: The Social Stratification of Non-Prevocalic /r/ in Edinburgh Speech. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 45(3), 229–259.

Labov, William. 1964. Stages in the acquisition of Standard English. In Roger Shuy, Alva Davis & Robert Hogan (eds.), *Social Dialects and Language Learning*, 77–104.

QSR International. (2023). NVivo (Version 14) [Computer software]. <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home>

The Equality Trust. (2023, October 27). The Scale of Economic Inequality in the UK. <https://equalitytrust.org.uk/scale-economic-inequality-uk/>