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Dialect-standard variability in early childhood:
A longitudinal corpus study of phonological
development

SFB 1287 “Limits of Variability in Language” – Project C10

Abstract:

In our talk, we present first results from our project on phonological dialect-standard variability in young children who acquire two varieties of German, a High Alemannic dialect spoken in southwestern Germany and standard German. Drawing on a longitudinal audiovisual corpus of spontaneous family interaction involving three children regularly recorded within the age span of approx. 1;6 to 4;0, the project’s aim is to uncover the language-internal and language-external factors that constrain this variability and the way it develops over time.

In this presentation, we focus on the family with the highest positive attitude towards the dialect, which is the main variety in their daily interactions. In order to explain the sociolinguistic variability in the language use of the child, we discuss the concept of phonological recency (cf. Schwarz, 2012) as one of the language-internal factors potentially relevant for dialect-standard variability. However, we demonstrate that language-external factors play a more prominent role in the child’s choice of phonological variants. Especially in pretend play activities, defined as a “subset of play activities characterized by an ‘as-if’ stance” (Lillard et al., 2013: 2), phonological features of standard German are frequently used as contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982) to mark the role play. Hence, we conclude that pretend play is a phenomenon that not only foreshadows cognitive development (cf. Lillard et al., 2013), but also constrains dialect standard-variability in early language use.

References

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- Schwarz, Christian (2012). Rezension als Faktor phonologischer Variation. *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 2/42. 29–44.