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Introduction

Much linguistic research has been conducted showing that native speakers of English develop certain perceptions and attitudes towards varieties of English. Particularly interesting are those studies which have looked at the age in which speakers begin to become aware of these language perceptions and develop their own attitudes toward particular varieties. By citing evidence from a number of existing surveys, the linguistic researcher Richard Day concludes that children acquire attitudes toward varieties of English at ages as young as three and a half years old and “are able to make language attitudinal judgments which reflect adult beliefs prevalent in the speech community.”¹ This conclusion is both surprising and shocking. If most children are able to perceive these attitudes and make their own judgments based off social attitudes at such a young age, then it seems there must be outside factors contributing to their rapid observations of adult beliefs.

The extensive research of Anjali Pandey on this subject shows that child-directed media, particularly the animated movie industry, is the primary outlet through which children develop these social and linguistic perceptions. Through a corpus study of 50 years of animated movies,

she finds through linguistic analysis that there is “a consistent attempt to present speakers of nonstandard varieties of English as powerless proletarians of low cultural and socioeconomic status.” Her insightful research has led me to further investigate the matter beyond the actual animated movies by testing her hypothesis and conclusions on real-life participants. This study will attempt to test linguistic perceptions of children by examining the perceived roles that children attribute to various varieties of English. I hypothesize that children will be able to identify the role a speaker plays in a movie based on linguistic devices alone. I hope to find that these linguistic attitudes are prevalent in children at very young ages and influence their social perceptions of speakers of the different varieties of English.

**Method**

In this study, I will look at the linguistic and social perceptions of children on particular varieties of English by conducting a study using child participants. I will conduct this study at the BYU preschool where I will have easy access to a large group of children. I will test 60 children, ages 3-6, getting 15 children in each age group. I will also look at gender as another variable, and ideally I will try to get an even distribution of male and female participants.

The first thing I will is propose a new animated movie to each of the participants with three main characters: a hero, the hero’s dim-witted but lovable friend, and the villain. I will give background information and show pictures representing each of the characters to help aid in cognition. I will then take each of the children individually and present to them three

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different audio clips—one Standard American English, one a Southern dialect, and one a British speaker. Each clip will be presented to each child participant once before asking any questions to help the children gage their choices. I will then present each audio clip a second time and ask the child to identify the role that each speaker will play in this bogus movie by either pointing to the proposed picture associated with their role or by giving a verbal response. I intend to control for other linguistic devices by having each speaker read the same short paragraph (or sentence). Because participants only clue to categorize the speakers will be speech varieties as heard through the audio clips, the study will be effectively structured to yield results regarding children’s attitudes toward various dialects of English. I propose that for the majority of participants, especially Caucasian participants and those whose parents speak Standard English, will identify the hero as the speaker of Standard English and each of the other characters will be identified with a non-standard dialect of English. I believe that the hero’s dim-witted but loveable friend will be identified by the majority of participants as the speaker with the Southern dialect and the villain will be identified with the speaker of British English.

Participants

Because my research looks primarily at the American animated movie industry, each of the participants must be American in order to effectively prove that the movie industry is affecting the linguistic perceptions of their intended target: American children. I will use children with ages ranging three to six. Each child will be grouped according to age and gender. Although it would not be possible for the purposes of this study, I think that it would be interesting to look
at other factors as well in future studies, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and the child’s and his/her parent’s dialect of English.

**Test Items**

I will test my hypothesis according to the answers the participants give in the study and each of the age and gender. I intend to test the results multiple regression which will measure which variable has the most influence on the child’s selection (age or gender). I believe that a multiple regression will effectively evaluate whether or not children’s age or gender factors into their language prejudices (or lack thereof). It may be the case that both, one, or neither of these elements plays a role in the development of language prejudices, and I hope to check for this as well.

**Results and Conclusions**

In this survey I hope to analyze the correlation results of the child groupings and the child responses. I will use a multiple regression to determine if my hypothesis is correct and if the results are significant. If my hypothesis is correct, I will determine that the corpus study conducted by Anjali Pandey was correct in concluding that the linguistic devices of the animated movies influences child perceptions of varieties of English. It will also confirm the studies by others that conclude that language attitudes influence the social psychology of discourse and that children are also affected by it.