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# Introduction: Language acquisition and sociolinguistic variation<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** language acquisition, sociolinguistics, variation, key issues

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To our knowledge, no book or journal has been dedicated to this theme since Romaine (1984). The special issue appears in a new scientific landscape of innovative attempts to link sociolinguistics and cognitive psycholinguistics. The reason for this growing proximity lies in changes of perspective within the cognitive sciences themselves. First, they pursue the goal of integrating the functional levels of knowledge, brain functioning, communication, and social life; second, they address the question of the dynamic relationships between variation and regularity, chance and necessity, empirical heterogeneity and coherent theorization. These mutual attractions have been made evident by the growing importance of two fields in the study of language: *Cognitive sociolinguistics* and *sociolinguistic cognition*.

Cognitive sociolinguistics explores language-internal or crosslinguistic variation linked to social dimensions, drawing on the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics and building on solid empirical methods (Kristiansen and Dirven 2008). Linguistic knowledge and patterns of thought are perceived as properties shared by communities. These communities are not homogeneous and idealized but heterogeneous and clearly positioned at the sociological, cultural, ideological or political levels. The characteristics of cognitive sociolinguistics are thus very close to the working hypotheses of sociolinguistics and represent what Kaufman and Clément (2011) call a social approach to cognition.

Things are different when we turn to sociolinguistic cognition (Campbell-Kibler 2010; Loudermilk in press). This field explores the cognitive and cerebral

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mechanisms “within the individual” which underpin the ability to produce sociolinguistic variation and to process it during perception. Studies in this area are rooted in the sociophonetic studies of the 1990s which established that the categorization of variants is mediated by knowledge of the (real or perceived) social characteristics of the heard speaker (Johnson et al. 1999; Niedzielski 1999). However, recent advances extend to other linguistic levels. They pursue several avenues of investigation: Cognitive encoding of variants; Influence of social knowledge on the processing of variation; Retrieval of social information during the processing of variation; Study of the cerebral mechanisms processing indexical information. Sociolinguistic cognition is close to psycholinguistics and represents the approach that Kaufman and Clément (2011) call a cognitive approach to social facts.

Studies on acquisition of variation have been conducted since the late 1960s, but the changing scientific landscape gives them a new impetus. The studies presented in this special issue lie at the intersection of the two traditions described above. On the one hand, our work draws on and contributes to sociolinguistics. As a result, it focuses on the acquisition of sociolinguistic patterns conceived of as properties shared by communities of speakers consisting of both children and adults. This work is typical of the social approach to cognition. At the same time, our work draws on the traditions of developmental psycholinguistics. These connections lead us to discuss the cognitive mechanisms that are involved in the acquisition of sociolinguistic variants and social meaning. In this sense our work is typical of the cognitive approach to social facts.

This dual inheritance implies that the contributions to this volume explore a great variety of topics using a combination of methods ranging from experimental designs (Barbu et al., Nardy et al.; Buson and Billiez; Docherty et al.) to corpus-based studies of daily interaction (Ghimenton et al.; Khattab; Smith et al.). Added to the growing body of studies on acquisition of variation published for four decades (reviewed by Nardy et al.), the contributions of the special issue address four questions which may be the key driving issues in research in the years to come:

1. The appearance of adult-like sociolinguistic patterns during development

At what age do they appear? In what order do they appear? Are the social constraints in place before or after the linguistic constraints? How do the patterns evolve? For example, do social differences or stylistic ability increase or decrease as children grow older?

2. The relationship between the linguistic environment – family, peers, teacher – and the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation

What input counts and at what age? Does direct correction have an impact and, if so, at what age? How do multiple influences combine? For example, how does the child connect the early use of stylistic patterns within family interactions and knowledge of the whole social and stylistic stratification within the community (Labov this issue)?

### 3. The motor for acquisition

Is acquisition guided by the awareness of social issues such as norms or identity? Or is it based on the statistical learning of implicit patterns encountered in the environment? If both, what are the respective contributions of these two influences during the course of acquisition?

### 4. The cognitive nature of the mechanisms responsible for the acquisition of variation

Do children infer a symbolic mechanism, for example in the form of variable rules including social constraints? Or do they construct more concrete schemas linking together social and linguistic information through exemplar-based learning? Do these two formats of knowledge coexist or alternate during the course of acquisition?

These issues are pivotal both for psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. In a paper devoted to child phonology, Menn and Matthei (1992: 224) regretted that “competition between two ways to say a word (. . .) is a strange notion for a linguist’s lexicon; the field has not really even assimilated Labov’s variable rule very well.” This has changed in the past decade. The question of lexical representations and the processes via which different variants of the same word are accessed is now considered to be a major challenge in the field of adult psycholinguistics (Luce and McLennan 2005). The studies contained in this volume, as well as other very recent studies (Miller 2012 *inter alia*) illustrate the same turn in the field of language acquisition.<sup>2</sup> The main contribution of the sociolinguistic approach to this field is the idea that the language environment the child participates in is variable and organized by social factors. The acquisition of variation is thus not a side issue in the general acquisition process, but an inherent part of it (Roberts

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<sup>2</sup> Two recent scientific events gathered a number of ongoing studies, which will be published in the near future:

- The workshop Variation in Language Acquisition, February 10–11, 2012, University of Münster, Germany, organized by G. de Vogelaer, M. Katerbow, J. Klom and B. Knothe, <http://www.uni-uenster.de/HausDerNiederlande/institut/veranstaltungen/vila2012/>
- The Child Language Variation session at the Sociolinguistics Symposium, August 21–24, 2012, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany, organized by V. Lacoste and L. Green, <https://www.conftool.pro/sociolinguistics-symposium-2012/sessions.php>

2005; Foulkes et al. 2005). This view is able to explain how knowledge about the social life and knowledge about language structure each other.

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