

The roles of familiarity and similarity in children's developing accent awareness

The current categorisation task tests 5-9-year-olds (N=34) in York on their ability to group speakers according to regional accent distinctions. The experiment involves grouping speakers together according to their native, home accent (Yorkshire) vs. one of three other accents (Standard Southern British English (SSBE), North Eastern, Scottish).

The design and analysis of the task aims to address the inconsistent results from previous studies investigating this question, (e.g. Floccia et al., 2009 vs. Jones et al., 2017), by focussing on three key aspects: children's familiarity with the accents, the similarity of the accent features, and the children's individual exposure to regional accent variation in their input. Findings indicate that the interplay of these three factors affects the children's performance. The children are better at grouping together speakers in the Yorkshire vs. SSBE round (average 77%, see figure 1). This is interpreted as being due to both the familiarity of the children with the standard accent, as well as the phonological features themselves being the most phonetically distinctive from their home accent. Furthermore, the children who have regular exposure to regional accent variation are better at accurately grouping the speakers throughout the experiment (see figure 2); this finding highlights the importance of variation in children's input for their developing sociolinguistic awareness.

Following an exemplar model of indexical learning (Foulkes 2010), it is hypothesised that the grouping of speakers by regional accent follows a developmental process. This process starts with the recognition of familiar speakers and the storing of social information in exemplars of their speech. It then progresses to the grouping together of speakers whose exemplars activate similar social information. Overall, therefore, it is anticipated that as children encounter more variation, they are better able to analyse and abstract over this variation appropriately in order to categorise speakers by their accent.

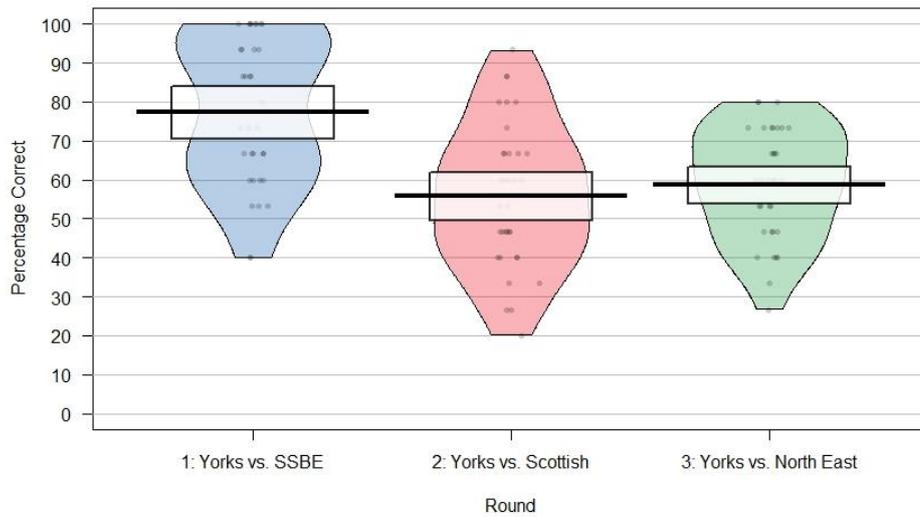


Figure 1. RDI plot: All results across the different rounds of the experiment

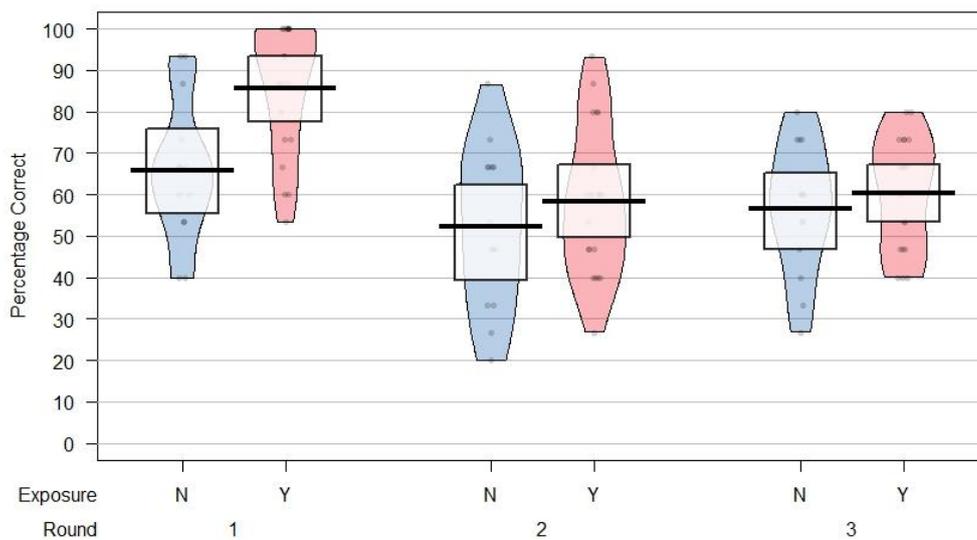


Figure 2. RDI plot: All results across the different rounds of the experiment, divided by exposure. (Y= regular exposure to regional variation, N = no regular exposure to regional variation)

References

- Jones, Z., Yan, Q., Wagner, L., & Clopper, C. G. (2017). The development of dialect classification across the lifespan. *Journal of Phonetics*, *60*, 20-37.
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- Foulkes, P. (2010). Exploring social-indexical knowledge: A long past but a short history. *Laboratory Phonology*, *1*(1), 5-39.