Discrimination and labeling of regional dialect across age groups

Elizabeth A. McCullough[1,2], Cynthia G. Clopper[1], and Laura Wagner[2]
[1]Department of Linguistics   [2]Department of Psychology
mccullough.136@osu.edu, clopper.1@osu.edu, wagner.602@osu.edu

Background

- 5- and 6-year-olds often cannot use regional dialect differences to categorize talkers (Floccia, Butler, Girard, & Goslin, 2009; Girard, Floccia, & Goslin, 2008; Wagner, Clopper, & Pate, 2014)
  - However, some can *discriminate* regional dialects (Girard et al., 2008)
  - 4- and 5-year-olds can separate New England talkers from those of other regional dialects (Jones, Clopper, & Wagner, this session)
- 8- to 11-year-olds (Jones et al., this session) and teenagers (Williams, Garrett, & Coupland, 1999) can use regional dialect differences for categorization
- Adults can use regional dialect differences for categorization (Clopper, Rohrbeck, & Wagner, 2012) and labeling (Clopper & Pisoni, 2004)

Research Questions

1. Can listeners discriminate regional dialects? At what ages?
2. Can listeners associate arbitrary (color) labels with regional dialects? At what ages?

Methods

Listeners

- Tested in the Language Sciences Lab at COSI
- 606 monolingual American English speakers ages 6-79, mostly from Ohio

Age	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-11	12-13	14-15	16-17	18-34	35-49	50+
N	20*	72	72	72	72	48*	54*	72	72	72

*data collection is ongoing

Stimulus materials

- Sentence: "She had your dark suit in greasy wash water all year"
- Talkers: 3 women from each of 4 regions in the United States (Midland, North, New England, South)
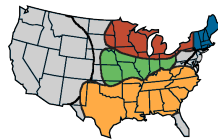
Procedure

- Discrimination task (15 trials): listen to 2 different talkers and say whether they are from the same place or different places
  - Participants were included only if they passed non-speech practice questions about "same" and "different" (at least 3 of 4 correct)
- Labeling task (6 trials): listen to talkers and say which brightly colored face each one goes with (based on a brief training session)
  - Randomization ensured that color preference did not bias results
- Each participant heard only 2 dialects in the discrimination task and the remaining 2 dialects in the labeling task
- All participants performed discrimination before labeling

Predictions

- Midland and North should be difficult to distinguish from one another, but New England and South should be easy to distinguish from all other dialects (Clopper et al., 2012)
- Discrimination ability may begin as early as age 5
- Labeling ability should begin after age 6, as it requires categorization
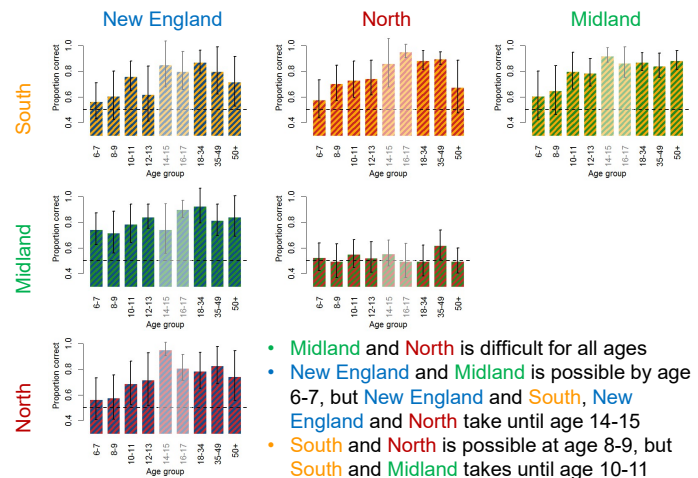 - But perhaps earlier for New England talkers (Jones, this session)

Results and Summary

Discrimination
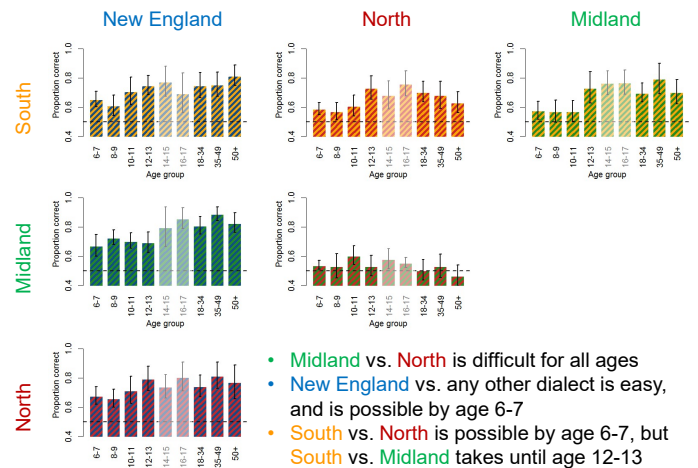
- Midland vs. North is difficult for all ages
- New England vs. any other dialect is easy, and is possible by age 6-7
- South vs. North is possible by age 6-7, but South vs. Midland takes until age 12-13

Labeling

- Midland and North is difficult for all ages
- New England and Midland is possible by age 6-7, but New England and South, New England and North take until age 14-15
- South and North is possible at age 8-9, but South and Midland takes until age 10-11

Discussion

- Successful regional dialect discrimination begins at or before age 6-7 for some combinations, but is not fully adult-like until age 12-13
- Successful regional dialect labeling begins at age 6-7 for New England and Midland but is not fully adult-like until age 14-15
- For combinations with New England, the ability to discriminate dialects precedes the ability to assign labels to them (as in Girard et al., 2008)
- However, for South with North as well as South with Midland, the ability to assign labels to dialects precedes the ability to discriminate them
  - Participants with these combinations in labeling heard New England in discrimination, which may have trained them to hear differences well
  - Participants with these combinations were different across tasks, and perhaps had different regional backgrounds