

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LINGUISTIC SKILLS IN SOME  
TRINIDADIAN CHILDREN: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO  
VERB PHRASE DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT

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This study was undertaken to assess the early development of the Verb Phrase (VP) in the speech of three children growing up in the linguistic setting of Trinidad, with differential exposure to Standard English (SE), and Trinidad Creole (TC). Samples of speech were collected starting as near as possible to the onset of morpho-syntactic marking on the verb, at ages 2;0, 2;3, and 2;4, and continuing up until 3;9, 4;1, and 4;9 respectively.

It was found that the children's usage of the varieties in contact reflected closely their differential exposure, and that style-shifting, which involved morpho-syntactic variation between TC and SE forms, developed for two of the three children before age 3;0. A similar order of development of conceptual categories, largely confirmatory of that for other studies of tense-aspect-modality, was noted, although there were minor differences in their surface realizations which largely reflected input phenomena.

These findings add to our knowledge of the way in which language is acquired, indicating that knowledge of language as appropriate is not necessarily a development separate from the acquisition of forms per se, but rather is an integral part of formal development. Moreover, the study demonstrates that learners may acquire a knowledge of the approximate percentage a variable form should be used from the earliest stage (cf. Labov, 1969; Bickerton, 1971), not as a fixed group norm, but as a direct response to the social milieu in which they live and to which they make sociolinguistic adjustments.

A full explanation for the details of grammatical development can then be found only in a consideration of cognitive, linguistic and social factors.