

WICL-6 abstract.

Phonological variation in child-directed speech in Hong Kong Cantonese

Alan C. L. Yu
University of Chicago
aclyu@uchicago.edu

Phonetically natural sound changes are often assumed to have articulatory, auditory, perceptual, or aerodynamic origins. Any account of sound change must reckon with enhancement of phonetic precursors in order to account for the emergence of categorical sound patterns. Recent studies have advocated viewing child-directed speech (CDS) as a form of hyperspeech. From the perspective of sound change, the child's phonetic inputs, skewed by the enhancing characteristics of CDS, might lead the child's own production to reflect those enhanced features. To investigate the role of the linguistic inputs to child language acquisition as a potential engine of enhancement that propels (or hinders) sound change, we examined the production of 26 Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking mothers when speaking to their children and to another adult. While well-established sound changes in progress exhibit a "reversal to standard" pattern in CDS, gradient phonetic variation not only is not reduced in CDS, but, in some mothers' cases, the variation is amplified.



Short Bio:

Dr. Alan Yu is interested in questions related to language variation and change, particularly with regard to the so-called actuation problem: what causes the inception of language change, if the linguistic conditions favoring particular changes are always present? He approaches this question from the point of view of individual differences, focusing particularly on how differences in the socio- and neuro-cognitive make-ups lead to variability in perceptual and production norms across individuals and how such variability relates to socio-indexical factors. He has done extensive work on Cantonese and Washo, a Native American language spoken in California and Nevada. In his spare time, he also works on the morphology-phonology interface, his first love in linguistics.