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# An Introductory Investigation Into Bidialectalism

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# An Introductory Investigation Into Bidialectalism

# An Introductory Investigation Into Bidialectalism<sup>1</sup>

Kirk Hazen

## 1 Introduction

As is well-recognized in sociolinguistic research (e.g. Biber & Finegan 1994; Coupland 1980; Giles & Coupland 1991; Labov 1972), people may shift sociolinguistic styles in different contexts. These styles range along a continuum between different dialects, usually standard and vernacular varieties. At the extreme ends of the style-switching continuum is often assumed to be bidialectalism. Although much discussed in educational and speech pathology debates (e.g. see Adler 1993; ASHA 1987; Wolfram, Adger & Christian 1999), no sociolinguistic study has directly assessed this supposed ability. Its name is metaphorically derived from bilingualism, where one speaker can produce two languages in nonpracticed conversation, but how analogous bidialectalism is to bilingualism is a difficult question. With no sociolinguistic study on bidialectalism, we do not know the qualitative or quantitative linguistic and sociolinguistic constraints for potentially bidialectal speakers. When we eventually come closer to understanding the supposed ability of bidialectalism, we may better understand the production of sociolinguistic variation in the language faculty. In turn, we may also better advise educational institutions which bandy about the term *bidialectalism* without any precise meaning behind it.

One of the preliminary but most difficult aspects of this study is appropriately defining the key terms. In fact, this preliminary philosophical/scientific step may not only determine the research findings, but may be the only factor for determining if bidialectalism is possible. It is well known in linguistic circles that metalinguistic terms such as *language* and *dialect* are prescientific and are recognized for their ambiguity (Milroy 1987). I adopt here the constraint on the term *language* that it be mutually intelligible; I understand the difficulty with mutual intelligibility as applied around the world, but this definition works well enough for the varieties investigated through this study. For the term *dialect*, I minimally define it as

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a set of linguistic features distinguishable both qualitatively and quantitatively from other dialects of the same language. The definition of *dialect*, I believe, is the foundering point in the debate. In defining dialect in this way, I may be misconstruing social dialects, which mark speakers as belonging to a certain social group on the basis of a few tokens of socially salient features. For example, habitual *be* (e.g. *Sometimes my ears be itching*) is popularly associated with African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), but if a speaker uses only habitual *be* and no other traditional AAVE feature (e.g. Bailey & Thomas 1998), I would argue that the person is not an AAVE speaker.

## 2 Productive vs. Receptive Bidialectalism

Perhaps the first point of methodology is to clearly demarcate where bidialectalism might be found within the human language system. In this first step we find the fact all linguists agree upon: Receptive multidialectalism is a normal human ability. All normally-developed humans have the ability to understand multiple dialects of their native languages. In a study of Detroit youth, Weener (1969) carries out a quantitative, educational study of bidialectal comprehension focusing on comprehension of standard English (both phonology and syntax) by nonstandard speakers. He writes (1969:199), "In general, when the speaker of one dialect must process a verbal message from another dialect, the redundancy in that message is less for him than for a speaker of the dialect in which the communication was presented." From his study, he concludes that the lower-class, African-American subjects were able to understand European-American middle class English, but not vice versa, because the African-Americans had previously been exposed to the European-American variety. In general for Weener, bidialectal perception is strictly a matter of having had enough exposure to the variety. He writes (1969:199) "The child who is regularly exposed to two dialects, as is the case with the [African-American] children in this research, may develop bidialectal comprehension skills but speak (produce) only one of the two dialects." Although Weener goes further than others in his field to study bidialectal comprehension, he makes no attempt to study bidialectal production.

## 3 Definitions from Other Fields

In the 1970s and 1980s, speech pathology spent a considerable amount of time confronting dialect prejudice in their own clinical practices (Cole 1985;

Wolfram, Adger & Christian 1999). They also debated the official line to take towards working with speakers of vernacular dialects; the American Speech and Hearing Association's "Social Dialects Position Paper" calls for elective teaching of a standardized variety (ASHA 1987). The contrary view (Adler 1985; 1987) supports mandatory teaching of a standardized variety. This entire debate is cast as whether or not to enforce "bidialectalism," in other words whether or not to add a standard dialect to the speakers' vernacular dialect (which is assumed to be a normal activity).

Adler (1993:23) comments that in bidialectalism (as an educational approach), "the perdurable quality of diverse cultural dialects is recognized, but the use of standard English to sustain our national culture is also valued." Apparently in this kind of statement, the nation's culture is assumed to be monolithic and viable only in one certain variety of English.<sup>2</sup> Adler claims that (1993:25) eliminating the cultural dialect would be unethical, but this claim is under the assumption that bidialectalism does not alter the speakers' original dialect.

Geiger & Greenberg (1976), in a study that focused on lexical and syntactic differences, assert that "It is possible to teach Standard English to the black child without teaching him to stop using or to devalue his native dialect" but they give no references to studies that support their assertion. Taylor (1989), making the same assumptions about bidialectalism, presents a book length study of employing educational bidialectalism to help vernacular speaking African-Americans learn standard written English. For teaching standard Australian English to vernacular speakers of Aboriginal English, Kaldor (1991) suggests that bidialectalism is not only possible but is the goal for second dialect programs. Again, no clear boundaries are set for what bidialectalism may be and when a child might achieve it in these studies for spoken or signed language.

#### 4 Linguistics Studies Addressing Potential Bidialectalism

Over the last 40 years of linguistic research, we have made sizeable advances in determining the general structure of the language faculty and the influence of society on language variation. One means of approaching the bidialectalism question is through a standard linguistic model. According to standard linguistic theory (e.g. Chomsky 1995, Haegeman 1994, Jackendoff

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<sup>2</sup> Apparently, according to Adler's view, written works (e.g. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*) not in standard English are not part of the national culture. At the heart of this kind of statement by Adler lies most of the motivation for bidialectal programs (see James Sledd 1969).

1997, Kenstowicz 1994), speakers of a language have a mental grammar for that language, and multilingual speakers have a Grammar  $G$  for every language  $L$ . Since every speaker produces a particular form of a language, a speaker's grammar  $G_1$  is set to produce a particular dialect  $D_1$ . To recast the bidialectal question in this framework, although a speaker can become bilingual by building another grammar  $G_2$ , we do not know if speakers can bifurcate their  $G_1$  to produce  $D_1$  and a second dialect  $D_2$ .<sup>3</sup> If a speaker produces  $D_1$  and then acquires features of another dialect, will that speaker acquire those features with the same qualitative and quantitative constraints found in the second dialect area? Will the speaker be able to switch between sets of dialect features instead of mixing linguistic features from two dialects into an unbifurcated dialect? If the speaker is past the critical age of language learning, will the speaker achieve fluency with those features of the second dialect as a native dialect speaker would?

This type of standard linguistic model is not however the only means of approaching the bidialectalism question. The linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of code-switching between languages have been explored (e.g. Fuller 1996; Milroy & Muysken 1995; Myers-Scotton 1993; Myers-Scotton & Jake 1995; Poplack 1980; Poplack, Sankoff & Miller 1988) as well as the sociolinguistic aspects of second language acquisition (Preston 1989, 1996). One ability well researched in linguistics is that of bilingualism (Romaine 1995). Through rational inquiry and empirical studies, Romaine (1995) clearly demonstrates that the study of bilingualism needs social, linguistic, and psychological analysis to reach explanatory adequacy and that current models of the mind (Chomsky 1995) are inadequate since they are based on monolingual speakers. In addition, Gardner-Chloros (1995:68) claims the discrete alternation of bilingual speakers from one language to another language is "the exception rather than the rule." In sociolinguistics, despite extensive work on language variation, no one has seriously investigated whether humans are capable of maintaining two dialects in the same ways they can maintain two languages. The possible extent of bidialectalism is an essential theoretical and practical question with surprisingly little empirical data on the topic.

Although few researchers have considered the implications of maintaining two dialects within the grammar of the same language, some

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<sup>3</sup> I realize that for multilingual speakers, their grammars may be intertwined so that both intersentential and intrasentential code switching occur. For multilingual speakers, however, it is possible to carry on conversation in one language for a time and then, perhaps with a switch in sociolinguistic context, switch to another language. Can the same be said of two dialects as coherent sets of features?

have addressed it. The most recent sociolinguistic work of this type is Labov (1998) who discusses a mental model for language variation in the tense/aspect system for AAVE; this model assesses variation as emanating from one grammar with two co-existent systems. Labov (1998:140) claims that AAVE and a more standard variety of English are not separate systems, like English and French grammars, but that the "popular approach to the use of AAVE applies this intuitively: 'I can speak Black English or I can speak Standard English.' However, empirical study of speakers' behavior has never justified the application of this condition; instead we find a continuum of styles and an intimate mixing of different values of the variants (inherent variation)." Although Labov argues for co-existent systems within the mental grammar of the AAVE speaker, he makes no specific claims that AAVE speakers are bidialectal because their mental grammars have codependent systems.

In another study which looked at a potentially bidialectal situation, Poplack (1978) assesses the degree of dialect acquisition for Puerto Rican-American children in Philadelphia using six phonological variables, each with Puerto Rican Spanish and Philadelphian variants. Some of the variables also had Black English Vernacular variants. She concludes that "It is undeniable that these children possess elements of two linguistic systems, and have structured this input in a socially significant way." Dialect acquisition studies appear unified that speakers exposed to two or more dialects may acquire features of each and that these features are socially weighted. What is not clear is whether the speakers can produce the forms as coherent sets of language variation patterns.

Overall, acquisition of language variation has not had the root thrust of theoretical critique that first language acquisition has had in formal linguistics. Sociolinguistic researchers (Chambers 1992; Guy & Boyd 1990; Payne 1980; Roberts 1997, 1999; Roberts & Labov 1995) recognize that age is an important factor in dialect acquisition. For example, Roberts and Labov (1995) examine how well and when children obtain [æ] in Philadelphia speech and found that children learned the variable rules by age four for raising and tensing [æ]; the children were then not just observers of the speech community but participants in it. Roberts (1997) analyzed preschoolers' speech for (-t, d) deletion and found that "children as young as three, for the most part, mastered the phonological constraints on (-t, d) deletion". She (1997:365; 1999) also strongly argues that the children are learning language variation patterns, not simply imitating frozen pronunciations in lexical items. The question of dialect acquisition is crucial for understanding the supposed phenomenon of bidialectalism.

## 5 Dialect Acquisition

The most relevant study for future work with bidialectalism is Chambers' (1992) work on dialect acquisition. It establishes technically precise methodology for handling language variation patterns from two dialects. Chambers (1992) reveals eight general trends of speakers' dialect acquisition resulting from extensive dialect contact. The degree to which a speaker may take on a new dialect fall under different terms. *Accommodation*, originally a term of social psychology (Giles & Smith 1979), is a response to a particular context, including physical scene and social roles played, in which a person's dialect is modified in a targeted direction. Short-term accommodation is "transitory linguistic behaviour." Long-term accommodation is a more permanent adjustment and does not fluctuate greatly between different social contexts. In contrast, Chambers delineates a third type: acquisition. Chambers relies on Trudgill's (1986:40) characterization of acquisition as a state where sufficiently frequent accommodation allows a feature to "become a permanent part of a speaker's accent or dialect, even replacing original features." For bidialectalism to be real, the speaker would have to permanently acquire the features of the second dialect and not have them replace original features.

Chambers' eight principles of dialect acquisition deal with both lexical and phonological aspects of dialect acquisition. I address only the phonological aspects here. His five phonological constraints are 1) Simple phonological rules progress faster than complex ones; 2) Acquisition of complex rules and new phonemes splits the population into early acquirers and later acquirers; 3) In the earliest stages of acquisition, both categorical rules and variable rules of the new dialect result in variability in the acquirers; 4) Phonological innovations are actuated as pronunciation variants; 5) Eliminating old rules occurs more rapidly than acquiring new ones.

These principles of dialect acquisition are important for the study of bidialectalism, and their support or refutation helps us understand how the language faculty acquires the processes of a new dialect and what becomes of the old processes. These principles might also mirror principles for what speakers may be capable of in bidialectalism: for example, if phonologically complex rules (e.g., [ay] monophthongization), are acquired later than phonologically simple rules (e.g., [n] ~ [ŋ] alternations as in *Walki[n]*), then perhaps speakers can maintain old and new phonologically simple rules, which would feed style shifting, but not old and new phonologically complex processes.



One of the basic and most important questions Chambers asks is how are new phonological processes acquired? Chambers (1992:693) claims that, much like the lexical diffusion model of language change, "phonological innovations are actuated by the acquisition of particular instances of the new rules or phoneme, and they only become rule-governed or systematic...after a critical mass of instances has been acquired." For those acquiring a new dialect, Chambers remarks that their phonological output follows the S-curve of language change where the output over time starts slow, then rises sharply, and finally slowly progresses towards categoricity. This S-curve model fits the generalization that those acquiring a dialect learn lexicalized pronunciation without a change to the phonology of the mental grammar, but once they develop the phonological process adherent to the phonology of the second dialect, then the percent of their output rapidly rises to roughly 80 percent. Whether or not the speaker can then become a fully-fluent speaker of that dialect depends on the age of the speaker at the time of acquisition.

As Chambers notes (1992:695), acquiring a new dialect is not only coming to sound like the new speakers but sounding less like the old. For a feature like *r*-lessness, we might expect the speaker to show an increase in the rate of *r*-fullness in direct proportion to the rate of *r*-lessness, but it may be that *r*-fullness increases when before a consonant (e.g. *Card* [ka:d] > [ka:d]) but not before a pause. Until we assess the specific environments, there is no way to know how any particular variable is lost or learned, and such a precise analysis of a potential bidialectalism situation is an essential part of the methodology.

In a footnote, Chambers (1992:695) writes, "dialect acquirers who immigrate after the critical age invariably discover when they revisit their old homes that their dialect is now perceived as 'foreign', yet their neighbors in their new homes also perceive their speech as 'nonnative.' Immigrants, often to their bafflement, come to sound less like the people in the old region without sounding quite like the people in the new region. The old dialect and the new one are not the converse of one another, but poles on a continuum." The dialect immigrant has ranged between those poles. In a parallel assessment, Wolfram, Adger and Christian (1999:125) note that when children are moved from one dialect area to another, the children may rapidly adopt the dialect features of the new area. What no research has looked at is whether anyone can coherently maintain the dialect features of their original area and acquire features of their new area.

## 6 Criteria for Bidialectalism

In this section, I outline the requirements for investigating bidialectalism, including its place in the style shifting continuum along with qualitative and quantitative requirements. In Figure 1, bidialectalism is polarly contrasted with monolectalism. One of the basic assumptions and often illustrated facts of modern sociolinguistics is that all speakers have a variety of styles. Thus, no speaker is monolectal. At the other end of the continuum, I propose placing bidialectalism. In making bidialectalism the opposite pole from monolectalism, I argue that no speaker has the ability to switch between two dialects as coherent sets of language variation patterns with quantitative and qualitative accuracy to both dialects.

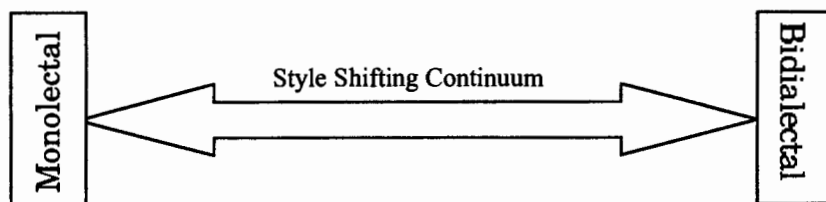


Figure 1: A Potential Theoretical Space for Bidialectalism

In a qualitative view, for a person to be bidialectal, and not simply party to two styles drawn from different social or regional dialects, that person would need to have patterns something like that found for Speaker C in Table 1 below, but perhaps for a wider range of language variation patterns. If Speaker A is representative of Dialect A, and Speaker B is representative of Dialect B, then for Speaker C to be bidialectal between Dialects A and B, Speaker C would need to produce the features of both A and B in a mutually exclusive manner. Although certainly not all bilingual conversation is mutually exclusive between language features, it is humanly possible for bilinguals to meet this mutual exclusivity criterion. For bidialectalism to be analogous to bilingualism, then it must be humanly possible to meet this criterion with two dialects of the same language.

Language Variation Pattern	Speakers		
	A	B	C
reduction of final nasal (e.g., <i>man</i> /mæn/ → [mæ̃])	√		√
final consonant deletion (e.g., <i>nice</i> /nays/ → [na:])	√		√
final stop devoicing (e.g., <i>bad</i> /bæd/ → [bæ̃t])	√		√
loss of [j] after consonants (e.g., <i>huge</i> /hjudʒ/ → [hudʒ])	√		√
substitution of /k/ for /t/ (e.g., <i>basket</i> /bæsket/ → [bæstet])	√		√
/ɛ/ lowering preceding /r/ (e.g., <i>square</i> /skwæɹ/ → [skwæɹ])		√	√
stressed interdental fricative deletion (e.g., <i>there</i> /ðɛɹ/ → [ɛɹ])		√	√
palatal fronting (e.g., /sɹɪmp/ → [sɹɪmp])		√	√
/l~/~ɛ/ merger preceding nasals (e.g., /tɪn/, /tɛn/ → [tɪn])		√	√
intrusive /ɹ/ with unstressed final /o/ (e.g., /felo/ → [felɹ])		√	√

Table 1: Hypothetical Bidialectal Qualitative Range

With quantitative constraints, the bidialectal speaker should be able to match the language variation patterns of native dialect speakers. The distinctions between the lowlands and Appalachian areas provide an instructive illustration. In Figure 2 are the rates of /ay/-ungliding for a European-American family (a mother, two sons, and a daughter) from Warren County, NC (Hazen 2000b). Although their rates differ for voiceless obstruents, they are consistently lower than for the other three categories.

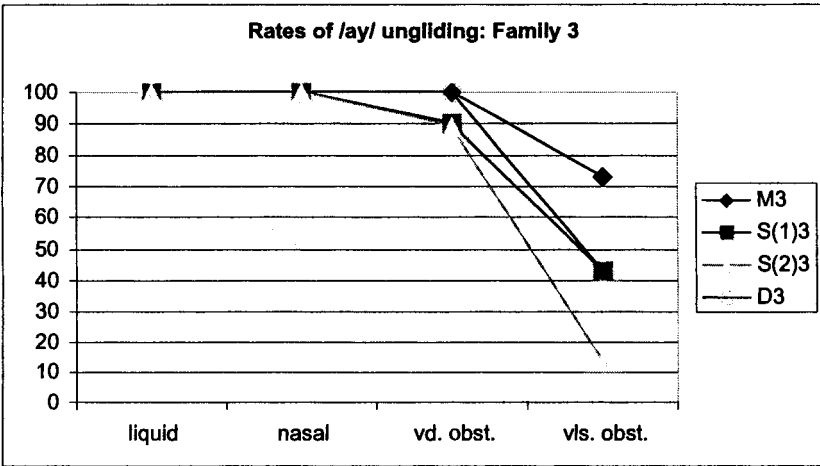


Figure 2: Rates for /ay/-Ungliding

The key distinction between this typical pattern for many Southerners and the traditional pattern for Appalachian speakers is the lower rate of ungliding before voiceless obstruents. Traditional Appalachian speakers have consistently high rates of /ay/-ungliding even before voiceless obstruents. For any of these speakers to be bidialectal with Appalachian English, they would not need to acquire /ay/-ungliding, but modify it in mutually exclusive ways, such that ungliding before voiceless obstruents would be adjusted to appropriate levels in appropriate contexts. Such bidialectal ability with quantitative skill is absent from the literature.

As a last criterion, motivation for bidialectalism should be considered. Studies of rural speakers in the south (Hazen 2000a; Wolfram, Hazen & Schilling-Estes 1999) along with studies of potential bidialectal situations (Hazen & Hall 1999; Wolfram, Hazen & Tamburro 1997) indicate two tendencies of mixed-dialect speech communities. First, one dialect is more highly valued than another, and consequently, the social processes involved have a tremendous impact on the production of dialect features within a certain context. If bidialectalism is possible, it is the social factors which motivate it, and precisely determining the social factors involved is critical to the study of bidialectalism. Second, in the study of potential bidialectal situations, not all of the features of  $D_1$  are altered in the attempt to target  $D_2$ ; only those forces that are socially marked are switched, albeit at various rates.

Whether or not these criteria remain the methods of evaluating supposed bidialectalism over time, clear criteria must be established or else practitioners in various fields will employ the term *bidialectalism* without regard to what it might mean.

## 7 Failed and Potential Methods

In this section, I explain some of the methods and their motivations that have been attempted to date by the West Virginia Dialect Project (WVDP) to study bidialectalism. Over the last two years, the WVDP has attempted to capture examples of bidialectalism either through participant observation or recorded sociolinguistic interviews. Although we have gathered much data which may inform the bidialectalism debate, we have yet to observe any examples of bidialectalism. Those methods that have failed are also included so that other researchers may either avoid or improve upon them.

In a preliminary study of West Virginia speakers (Hazen & Hall 1999), dialect accommodation was assessed for children and adults in two families in which the children grew up in dialect areas different from those of their parents. The children were found to have dialect features of both their

parents and of their local community, demonstrating a mixed set of dialect features. Of the features the children acquired, their patterns fell in line with traditional sociolinguistic patterns for their own communities and for their parents' home community, especially when the two overlapped. None of the children demonstrated bidialectal ability with either set of features. When the parents adopted highly salient features of their new dialect areas for reasons of accommodation, they did not adopt these features faithfully and violated qualitative and quantitative constraints. For example, one speaker, Mrs. H, who had been raised in the north but who had lived in Charleston, West Virginia, for thirty years, produced monophthongal [a:] predominantly only in her reading passage during a sociolinguistic interview. She produced this form in a more formal context since in her public life as a lawyer, most of the people she interacts with on a regular basis are southern speakers with monophthongal [a:]. However, her production of [a:] did not conform to the traditional qualitative constraints of the sonorancy of the following environment nor did they approach the rates found in traditional southern speech, barring her, by the quantitative criterion, from being considered bidialectal with this feature. (Dorrill 1986; Labov & Ash 1997; Wolfram, Hazen, & Tamburro 1997; Wolfram, Hazen, & Schilling-Estes 1999).

First-year experience: In this first attempt at capturing bidialectalism in action, the WVDP recorded first-year students at West Virginia University in sociolinguistic interviews during their first semester. The hope was then to record them again during their second semester and again at their home residence during the summer. We would have then compared the interviews to assess whether the subject population had acquired any dialect features of the Morgantown area during their first year at the University, and whether they were then able to lose them once they arrived home. Our target students were first-generation students from southern West Virginia, which is a distinctly different dialect region (Kurath & McDavid 1961). An often reoccurring scene for rural students who attend college is that the first trip home is marked with surprise for both the returning student and the family/friends in regard to dialect distinctions. Often, students comment on how vernacular everybody at home sounds, and everybody at home comments on how the students sound more standard (e.g., snobbish, uppity). We wanted to conduct a project that tracks those changes. Unfortunately, the majority of our subjects were unwilling to submit to second interviews, and no one was willing to do a third. Although we collected good interviews with data relevant to a state survey of West Virginia dialect features, the data were not especially relevant for bidialectalism. In a related study, we are currently comparing interviews from college students from rural areas to

friends who have never left those areas in southern West Virginia (Hazen, Bucko & Manetta 2001; Hazen & Fluharty 2001).

**Command performance:** In this second method, we asked self-proclaimed bidialectal speakers to perform their abilities. This second method has been successful for gathering interviews, and has been quite revealing in terms of the sociopsychological characteristics of self-proclaimed bidialectal speakers, but has not yielded any data which reflect a switch between two coherent sets of language variation patterns.

**Real-time change:** This study is currently underway and involves interviews conducted during 1993-1994 with Warren County, NC, teenagers (Hazen 2000a). Currently, these teenagers are in college in areas outside their dialect regions. Follow up interviews with these subjects are scheduled for future years to assess how their dialects were perceived at their colleges and whether there have been changes in their language variation patterns.

## 8 Research Questions and Methodologies

Drawn from the above discussion, I present some questions which should be addressed regarding potentially bidialectal speakers. Finding and properly analyzing data from such speakers may take protracted study and a good deal of luck, since such speakers, if they exist, are not an easily identifiable regional or social group. Although bidialectalism will most likely not become a hot topic in sociolinguistics, I do hope that researchers keep it in mind just in case they run across a potentially bidialectal speaker. In those instances, I intend for this article and the following research questions to provide a useful methodology for their analysis.

- Can a speaker fully acquire a second dialect and maintain the language variation patterns of the first dialect?
- Can a speaker who has acquired a second dialect in another region come back to the home region and continue to convince native speakers that the first dialect is authentic?
- If a speaker produces  $D_1$  and then acquires features of  $D_2$ , will that speaker acquire those features with the qualitative and quantitative constraints as a native speaker?
- Will the speaker be able to switch between sets of dialect features instead of mixing linguistic features from two dialects in a single production?
- Can the speaker produce both sets of language variation patterns in unpracticed conversation? Even in practiced conversation?

- Can a speaker switch more than sociolinguistic stereotypes? Can the speaker switch less salient markers or indicators?

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