29. 3. 2019

Dear Editor,

Please accept the submission of our paper entitled ‘How Does Dialect Exposure Affect Learning to Read and Spell? An Artificial Orthography Study’ for consideration at JEP: General. We believe that this study is of interest to the readership of this journal because it uses a strictly controlled experimental methodology – artificial language learning – to investigate how linguistic variation impacts literacy acquisition.

Dialect exposure effects in literacy acquisition have to date mainly been studied in naturalistic settings. The problem with this approach is that dialect exposure is confounded with a range of factors such as socio-economic status, cultural and teacher attitudes, home literacy and educational opportunities. Here, we examine whether putative detrimental effects of dialect exposure can arise merely from increased linguistic variation in the input.

While we broadly replicate previous findings that words with dialect variants are more difficult to read, we also find that when sufficient overall training is provided, learners exposed to dialect variation actually perform better overall. We explain this counterintuitive and, as we think, exciting finding in terms of choice of learning strategy that learners make based on the structure of the input they encounter. We believe that this finding may have important implications, especially in countries with considerable dialect variation such as the United States, the United Kingdom or Germany, and may invite further research into the important link between linguistic variation and literacy acquisition.

We also would like to point out that the methodological novelty of our approach lies in the implementation of artificial language learning as an online study (which reviewers may check out at the provided url in the manuscript), which enabled us to recruit a sizeable sample of participants, and that our data and analysis code are fully available on the Open Science Framework for reviewers and other interested researchers to scrutinise.

We suggest that this work be reviewed by experts in dialect variation and reading acquisition and list a few potential reviewers below.

We look forward to your editorial decision on this submission.

Sincerely,

Vera Kempe, Glenn Williams and Nikolay Panayotov

Suggested reviewers:

Jessica Bühler: Department of Psychology, University of Basel

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