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Publication date:
2020

Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 22. Apr. 2020
An acquisitional perspective on language perception: the social meaning of borrowing

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Situated on the intersection of contact linguistics and developmental sociolinguistics, this paper aims to validate the widely accepted, but largely unverified, idea that prestige plays a role in the borrowing process (see e.g. Matras 2009). Furthermore, we contribute to current sociolinguistic research on the acquisition of prestige: if a variety is considered prestigious by a speech community, when do emerging L1 learners adopt this social meaning (e.g. De Vogelaer & Katerbow 2017)? Specifically, we present an experiment on the perception of English loanwords by 212 Dutch speaking primary school children of three age groups that aims to answer the following questions: (1) are primary school children sensitive to the prestige of English loans in Dutch?; (2) if so, what are the attitudinal dimensions shaping that sensitivity, and how do they develop with age?

The experiment combines the matched guise technique (Lambert et al. 1960) with an onomasiological perspective on lexical borrowing (Zenner et al. 2012). A newly created cartoon hero is presented in two guises: a Dutch-only guise and a version with English alternatives for fifteen Dutch lexical items (e.g. koekjes/cookies). In addition to this speaker evaluation task, participants completed two further tasks verifying whether they understood the English and Dutch words presented in the cartoon and whether they recognized the English loans as being English.

Our results reveal clear differentiation between age groups: where the youngest group has no clear preference for either guise, the oldest group strongly prefers the English guise. Moreover, factor analyses indicate that an underlying structure of children’s attitudes only emerges in the older groups. Echoing previous work (e.g. De Vogelaer & Toye 2017), these results seem to suggest that the social meaning of language variation develops gradually with age. Furthermore, our data suggests a strong link between language awareness and the prestige of loanwords.