Children’s preference for English-sounding neologisms: An experimental approach

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Background: In the past decade, research on the lexical influence of English on Western European languages has undergone a socio-pragmatic turn, prioritizing the social meaning of English influence over its structural integration in the receptor language (Peterson & Beers Fägersten 2018; Zenner, Rosseel & Calude 2019). The last few years have also seen the growth of the field of developmental sociolinguistics, which investigates the acquisition of socially meaningful linguistic variation (e.g. De Vogelaer & Katerbow 2017). This study integrates a developmental sociolinguistic perspective with socio-pragmatic Anglicism research to explore how children, as potential leaders in the global spread of English (Berns 2007), attach meaning to the use of English lexical items in Dutch.

Research question: Through an experimental design, this study aims to investigate children’s preferences for English- or Dutch-sounding lexical items in order to gain insight into how children acquire and reproduce variation and drive contact-induced language change (Labov 2007). Specifically, we address the question of which factors steer Belgian Dutch preadolescent children’s preference for English- or Dutch-sounding neologisms as names for a series of new objects.

Respondents: 120 monolingual Belgian Dutch children from the same dialect area are included in a sample balanced for gender and age (including 8-9, 10-11 and 12-13-year-olds). Studying the preferences of children from this age range serves as a window on the evolution of children’s social evaluations as they transition from caregiver-oriented models of sociolinguistic variation towards peer-oriented models in adolescence (compare Holmes-Elliott 2016).

Design: The experiment introduces the children to 12 new concepts belonging to three different semantic fields (e.g. home life, IT). Each concept is introduced to the children with two alternative names, viz. artificial neologisms (compare Samara, Smith, Brown & Wonnacott 2017) which can be pronounced in a Dutch or English way and are phonotactically plausible in both languages (e.g. ‘snaster’, Dutch [snɔstər] vs. English [snæstəl]). The children are asked to indicate which of the two names they prefer for the object. The experiment also includes existing word pairs as a benchmark with which to compare children’s evaluations of the neologisms.

The experimental design addresses possible influencing factors on the choice of name for the objects: firstly, the experiment varies on the characteristics of the new object presented (e.g. homely objects vs. IT objects) and on the context in which it is presented (e.g. marketing,
journalism). Secondly, the children’s explicit attitudes towards the use of English and their awareness of the alternation between Dutch and English are elicited in post-tests.

**Analysis**: Multifactorial analyses uncover the complex interplay between lexical preference (dependent variable) and semantic field of the concept, presentation context, age, gender, awareness and reported attitudes (independent variables).

**Result**: Overall, the results allow us to track the evolution in children’s positioning towards English and Dutch as available lexical resources in their community. Results offer insight into how consistently children associate the use of (new) English words in Dutch with particular usage contexts.

**References**


