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# Belgian Dutch children's preferences for English-sounding neologisms: an experimental approach

Gillian Roberts, Eline Zenner & Laura Rosseel

**Background:** The emerging field of developmental sociolinguistics (De Vogelaer & Katerbow 2017), which investigates how children acquire socially meaningful linguistic variation, has so far mainly studied the *production of standard/vernacular phonetic variation* in acquisition (e.g. Holmes-Elliott 2016; Chevrot, Nardy, & Barbu, 2011; Docherty, Langstrof, & Foulkes, 2013).

This study aims to shift that focus in two ways. Firstly, targeting the alternation between English lexical items and heritage alternatives in the globalized Western European context, we foreground the acquisition of *contact-induced lexical variation*. Secondly, aiming to chart children's social evaluation of English lexemes, we complement the current production-oriented focus of developmental sociolinguistics with a *perception-centred* experimental approach.

**Aim:** This study aims to investigate children's preferences for English-sounding lexical items over heritage alternatives in order to gain insight into how children learn to attach social meaning to lexical variation. Specifically, we address the question of whether Belgian Dutch children find English-sounding names more appropriate for novel objects from certain semantic fields than Dutch-sounding names.

**Respondents:** 120 monolingual children are recruited in a sample balanced for gender and age (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 children to 16 novel objects belonging to four different semantic fields that index social meanings expected to be associated with English and Dutch words (English-prone fields: IT, youth culture; Dutch-prone fields: home & family, garden & pets). Each new object is accompanied by a sentence in Dutch describing its function, and a choice of two alternative names. The name pairs consist of graphemically identical neologisms (compare Samara et al. 2017) which are pronounced in a Dutch or English way. Neologism stimuli have been developed according to the following criteria: (1) phonotactical plausibility in both languages (e.g. "snaster", Dutch [snəstər] vs. English [snæstəʃ]); (2) sufficient distance between the English and Dutch element of each neologism pair and between neologisms and existing English and Dutch words; (3) adherence to one of a predetermined set of morphological patterns and consonant-vowel structures. Children choose which of the two names they prefer for the object. After the naming task, children's awareness of the linguistic phenomenon under study is tested in a language recognition task. Subsequently, respondents fill in a short questionnaire that elicits their overt attitudes towards the use of English in Dutch. Multifactorial analyses uncover the interplay between lexical preference (dependent variable) and semantic field of the object, age, gender, language awareness, and reported attitudes (independent variables).

**Results & implications:** Results will allow us to track the evolution in children's positioning towards English and Dutch as available lexical resources and shed light on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation in settings of language contact.

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