The acquisition of prestige :
Flemish elementary school kids' attitudes towards English loans

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Variationist research increasingly pays attention to the acquisition of sociolinguistic awareness by young children (Smith et al. 2013; Van de Mieroop et al. fortch.; De Vogelaer in press). Most of these studies focus on monolingual contexts: attention for the (acquisition of) awareness of source language prestige in borrowing contexts is rare (but see Clark/Schleef 2010 for research on adolescents). A similar gap is noted in contact linguistic research: although prestige is typically mentioned in anecdotal statements on motivations for lexical borrowing (e.g. Hock/Joseph 1996: 258), empirical evidence for its importance is scarce. Those studies that do pay attention to prestige, mostly restrict the attention to macro-social analyses (e.g. describing intensity of contact; Thomason/Kaufman 1988).

This paper aims to address this issue by studying Flemish elementary school kids' attitudes towards English loanwords. Specifically, a matched-guise experiment is conducted in an elementary school in Aarschot, involving 60 children aged 5, 7 and 9. The children are presented with a new cartoon hero in two guises. In the first guise, he only uses Dutch. In the second, Dutch and English are mixed. Table 1 contains the word pairs from the script that show variation between the two guises.

Dutch guise	**Mixed guise**
kinderen	kids
ster	star
superheld	superhero
tof	cool
hulpje	sidekick
vriend	friend
genieten & ontspannen	chillen & relaxen
gevecht	battle
slechteriken	bad guys
rugzak	backpack
snufjes	gadgets
feest	party
dag	bye

Table 1

In a first task, the children are asked to indicate which of both heroes they consider smartest, funniest, friendliest, etc. As such, we aim to reveal whether and from what age the typical dimensions solidarity, status and dynamism (see Grondelaers & Speelman) come into play for English loanwords. In a second task, we verify the vocabulary acquisition of the children: do they know the correct meaning of the presented English words or not? An interesting question is to what extent lexical acquisition and the acquisition of prestige run parallel: do children need to understand the English words before attaching prestige to them, or can they equally attach prestige to English-sounding words they do not understand?