13th International Symposium on Bilingualism, 10–14 July 2021, Warsaw, Poland

Learning the social meaning of English in Belgian Dutch: a neologism task with children and teens

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ABSTRACT

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, 2020; Chevrot et al., 2011). This study shifts the focus to a language contact setting as a window on how young language users acquire the ability to navigate variable social meanings in discourse (Eckert 2019).

Aim: This study experimentally explores variation in Belgian Dutch children's and adolescents' preference for English or Dutch names for a series of "new inventions".

Design: Respondents are introduced to novel objects belonging to four different semantic fields that index social meanings expected to be associated with English and Dutch words (e.g. English: IT; Dutch: home & family). Each trial introduces a "new invention" that has a particular function (e.g. an online game) and/or is intended for a particular user (e.g. young people). Respondents are then asked to choose which of two alternative names is the best fit for the proposed object. The name pairs consist of graphemically identical neologisms (cf. Samara et al. 2017) which are pronounced in a Dutch or English way. Neologism stimuli are phonotactically plausible in both languages (e.g. "snaster", Dutch [snɑstər] vs. English [snæstəɹ]). In a second phase, respondents are directly asked their preference for an English or Dutch name for the objects. Finally, a qualitative question probes children's awareness of the linguistic phenomenon under study. Multifactorial analysis will uncover the interplay between lexical preference (dependent variable) and semantic field, age, gender and language awareness (independent variables).

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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