

## Children's evaluation of socially meaningful language variation: methodological considerations

Laura Rosseel & Eline Zenner

[PGR workshop Queen Mary University of London, 21 September 2022](#)

In this workshop, we address the core question how and when young language users learn to recognise and evaluate socially meaningful language variation. After a general methodological discussion on the application of the matched-guise methodology for younger participants, we present three case-studies developed using the same cartoon superhero video, created particularly for this project.

**Starman or Sterrenman:** Case-Study 1 gauges 174 Belgian Dutch children's evaluation of two versions of the superhero: Sterrenman is a Dutch-only superhero, Starman instead regularly uses English loanwords. After evaluating the two guises, children took part in a series of post-test measuring language awareness and receptive knowledge of the words used in the script. Results show an incremental awareness of (the social meaning of) English words in Dutch, as well as gradually decreasing prestige for the Dutch-only guise.

**Meteorman:** Case-Study 2 aims to challenge these findings by replicating the Starman method for a different contact setting. Opting for a between- rather than a within-subject set-up, this case-study uses the Starman material to elicit 86 Swiss German children's attitudes towards ethnolectal variation. Results show how the indexical value of Swiss German ethnolect as attested in the adult community (urban, youthful, ethnic) is represented in a coarse-grained opposition in children's evaluation between "from around here" and "not from around here".

**Starman goes advertising:** Finally, Case-Study 3 explores the possibility to use Starman for applied research. Drawing from research on Foreign Language Display (Hornikx & van Meurs 2020), the study sets out to find out to what extent the use of English in Dutch commercials impacts perceived attractiveness of marketed products. Over 500 Belgian Dutch children were presented with three versions of Starman as the mascot for a new cookie brand, one using only Dutch, one using English discourse markers and one using English nouns. Children were asked which version they liked best, which one they would select if they were creating the ad, and to explain their reasoning. Results will be explored in a hands-on part of the workshop, where we invite the audience to dig into the data and reflect on the attested patterns, particularly in the open answers.

We end the workshop with a more fundamental discussion of the connection between evaluation and awareness, linking up with Preston's concept of 'noticing' (Preston 2011) and Bhatia's notion of 'genre' (Bhatia 1999), further expanding methodologically on the difficulty of developing a matched-guise based attitude measurement that allows for comparisons between disparate age groups seeking a balance between feasibility for the youngest and attractiveness for the oldest.