

Acquiring the social meaning of language variation: two experimental studies on children's evaluation of language variation in Belgium and Switzerland

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English Language and Linguistics research seminar
Northumbria University & University of Newcastle, 14 December 2022

This talk focuses on the question of how young language users learn to recognize and evaluate socially meaningful language variation. We present two case studies, shedding light on different types of linguistic variation in two different speech communities, but building on the same experimental methodology: a child-friendly adaptation of the well-established matched-guise technique using tailor-made audiovisual stimuli.

Case study 1 gauges 174 Belgian Dutch children's evaluation of two versions of a 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-tests 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.

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 builds on the video materials from the Starman study 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".

We discuss how both case-studies contribute to the upcoming field of developmental sociolinguistics both from a theoretical-descriptive perspective, as well as a methodological perspective. Despite the different settings in both studies, a number of striking similarities in the developmental trajectory of the participants are discernable. At the same time, we reflect on the challenges of developing experimental methods that allow for comparisons between disparate age groups seeking a balance between feasibility for the youngest and attractiveness for the oldest.