How children make sense of linguistic variation

from perception to evaluation

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ABSTRACT BOOKLET

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How children make sense of linguistic variation: from perception to evaluation

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TALK
10:00

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Sociolinguistic research shows that adult speakers have attitudes towards different accents. For example, speakers of Standard British English are considered more 'competent' than speakers with a London accent (Sharma et al., 2022). These associations were thought to appear during middle/late adolescence. Nevertheless, recent research shows that children's sociolinguistic competence appears during childhood (Dossey et al., 2020). Moreover, we know that both children and adults process their own native accent faster and more accurately than other accents (Cristia et al., 2012). However, we know very little about (i) how children develop attitudes towards accents, (ii) whether this development is influenced by their processing of accented speech and (iii) how linguistic exposure during development affects this process. The experiment presented here investigates the development of attitudes towards native and foreign accents from 7 to 11 years old. Moreover, it explores whether exposure to linguistic diversity during a child's upbringing affects these developmental trajectories.

We collected data from 249 children. Of these, 136 were born and raised in Plymouth (South West England, 74 girls). The other 113 were born and raised in London (51 girls). All participants were native speakers of English. For those participants that spoke more than one language, English was the language they used/heard the most. The stimuli included Southern Standard British English, the accent from South West England, a London accent and French-accented and Chinese-accented English. The children's caregivers completed a survey. Its aim was to gauge children's exposure to accents/languages and gather general demographic information. Children completed a battery of tests that included four tasks: (1) an intelligibility task (speech-in-noise), (2) a verbal-guise task (e.g. how smart they think a speaker of a given accent is), (3) an accent classification task, where they group multiple speakers of each accent, (4) the British Picture Vocabulary Scale, a receptive vocabulary task.

Results from the intelligibility task show that task performance improved with age across sites, but the percentage of correct answers each accent received varied. In Plymouth, the local and standard accents received the highest scores, while the London and Chinese-accented English scored lowest. In London, French-accented English and the Plymouth accent scored highest. In contrast, the London accent and Chinese-accented English scored lowest. In the verbal-guise task, the *smart* and *hardworking* variables show an age and accent interaction. However, their specific trajectories vary by location. In Plymouth, children's ratings between the ages of 7 and 9.5 years do not differ across accents. After the age of 9.5 years, they start rating Southern Standard British English and French-accented English higher than the Plymouth and London accents. In London, Southern Standard British English and

the Plymouth accent are rated highest from the age of 7 till the age of 9. In contrast, older children rated French-accented English highest and the London accent lowest.
In the classification task, scores in Plymouth improved with age. French-accented English and Southern Standard British English obtained the highest scores while Chinese- Accented English and London English the lowest. In London, performance did not vary with age, with younger children performing better than the corresponding age group in Plymouth. Regardless of age, French-accented English received the highest scores while London English the lowest among children from London.
Overall, there does not seem to be a relationship between intelligibility and the development of attitudes towards accents. In contrast, the results from the categorization and verbal-guise tasks suggest that there is a relationship between being able to categorize accents and showing attitudes towards them. Younger children from London perform better at the categorization task than children from Plymouth. Furthermore, young children from London show biases towards accents, while younger children from Plymouth did not. The age at which Plymouth children show accent biases matches the age at which their performance on the categorization task is equal to that of London children. Therefore, categorization could be argued to be a pre-requisite for accent biases.