



Social roles and language variation in acquisition

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Social roles, be they related to work (researcher), family (mother), or leisure (pianist), provide a powerful way in which we structure the world around us (Lynch 2007). Through our own experiences and activities, but also through top-down exposure to societal beliefs and ideological convictions, we acquire stereotypical expectations on the social behavior of role occupants. We for instance learn to associate wealth with doctors and bankers rather than with teachers and researchers, and softness with girls rather than boys (Koenig & Eagly 2014, 2019).

Presenting two studies, this talk aims to illustrate how social roles can increase our understanding of language variation in acquisition.

- Study 1 targets caregivers' expectations on their own language in the family home. Against the background of the controversial Flemish language situation, we compare 16 Belgian Dutch parents' choice for standard and non-standard variants in child-directed and adult-directed speech. Next, we link these results to caregivers' explicitly voiced attitudes on language variation and parenting in semi-structured interviews. Overall, our results reveal unresolved tensions between language behavior and top-down linguistic ideologies.
- Study 2 aims to uncover when Belgian Dutch preadolescents acquire shared expectations on the use of English loanwords. To that end, we first present results from a survey targeting 177 adult Belgian Dutch respondents, which reveal that English loanwords are associated more clearly with modern roles (e.g. rapper) than with public roles (e.g. minister) or traditional roles (e.g. farmer). When asking 26 Belgian Dutch preadolescents, aged 6 to 13, to perform these roles, they all clearly tune into these broader societal expectations: they use more English when performing English-prone roles than when performing Dutch-prone roles. Age variation is attested in children's ability to metalinguistically reflect on their performance.

In our discussion, we explore and evaluate different interpretations of the results. On the one hand, social roles could appear to be a soothing structural mechanism that help us align our presuppositions about people's language use (Preston 2011), as in Study 2. On the other hand, shared beliefs about appropriate role behavior can reinforce existing (standard) language ideologies and might in that sense impinge on ongoing language change, as in Study 1. From here on, we pinpoint avenues for future research, and open up the debate on the explanatory potential of social roles' combined focus on the individual and the community, expectation and innovation, and acquisition and consolidation.

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