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## Bilingual children's social preferences hinge on accent



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### ABSTRACT

Past research finds that monolingual and bilingual children prefer native speakers to individuals who speak in unfamiliar foreign languages or accents. Do children in bilingual contexts socially distinguish among *familiar* languages and accents and, if so, how do their social preferences based on language and accent compare? The current experiments tested whether 5- to 7-year-olds in two bilingual contexts in the United States demonstrate social preferences among the languages and accents that are present in their social environments. We compared children's preferences based on language (i.e., English vs. their other native language) and their preferences based on accent (i.e., English with a native accent vs. English with a non-native [yet familiar] accent). In Experiment 1, children attending a French immersion school demonstrated no preference between English and French speakers but preferred American-accented English to French-accented English. In Experiment 2, bilingual Korean American children demonstrated no preference between English and Korean speakers but preferred American-accented English to Korean-accented English. Across studies, bilingual children's preferences based on accent (i.e., American-accented English over French- or Korean-accented English) were not related to their own language dominance. These results suggest that children from diverse linguistic backgrounds demonstrate social preferences for native-accented

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speakers. Implications for understanding the potential relation between social reasoning and language acquisition are discussed.

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## Introduction

Scholars across disciplines have noted a puzzling observation: Children often learn to speak like their peers, not their parents (e.g., Harris, 2009; Labov, 2009; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1995). Linguist William Labov discussed that children's local social groups, not their parents' manner of speaking, determine the specific variations in social dialect that children exhibit in their speech (Labov, 2009). As an illustration, children of immigrants typically develop the accent of their peers (native speakers of the local language) when they arrive in a new country during early childhood despite exposure to their parents' non-native accent (Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995; Flege, Yeni-Komshian, & Liu, 1999; Gleitman & Newport, 1995; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Newport, 1990). By adulthood, individuals who do not acquire a native phonology face challenges in communicating with others, and this in turn negatively affects feelings of social belonging (Gluszek, Newheiser, & Dovidio, 2011). Specifically, among a group of non-native English-speaking adults, individuals who had spent fewer years living in the United States and learned English later in life were more likely to be perceived (by themselves and others) as speaking with a non-native accent, which in turn had negative consequences for both their perceived ability to successfully communicate with others in English and their feelings of social belonging in the United States. Accordingly, the motivation to feel a sense of social belonging in one's second language community, among a variety of socio-affective factors, may be related to the process of language learning (Clément, 1980; Ellis, 1997; Finegan, 1999; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Taylor, Meynard, & Rheault, 1977). In light of these patterns observed across the lifespan, children learning the accent of their peers can have functional significance for their social experiences.

The puzzle of why and how children shift from the language and accent of their parents to that of their peers raises important questions regarding children's early language-based social preferences. A growing body of research has shown that monolingual children demonstrate robust social preferences for their native language and accent over unfamiliar languages and accents (e.g., Dailey, Giles, & Jansma, 2005; Day, 1980; Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013a; Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus, & Spelke, 2009) as well as preferences for monolingual over bilingual individuals (Byers-Heinlein, Behrend, Said, Gergis, & Poulin-Dubois, 2017). For instance, monolingual White children with American accents selected potential friends who matched their accent but not their race (i.e., American-accented Black children) rather than children who matched their race but not their accent (i.e., French-accented White children) (Kinzler et al., 2009). In addition, children living in Hawaii preferred standard English speakers over Hawaiian Creole English speakers (with a few noteworthy exceptions to be discussed further; Day, 1980). Several studies have shown that bilingual children also demonstrate language-based social preferences (e.g., Cremona & Bates, 1977; Dailey et al., 2005; Kinzler, Shutts, & Spelke, 2012; Souza, Byers-Heinlein, & Poulin-Dubois, 2013). For instance, bilingual children in Canada preferred native-accented speakers over individuals who spoke in an unfamiliar foreign accent (Souza et al., 2013).

These studies provide an important foundation to begin to understand both monolingual and bilingual children's social preferences based on language. Nonetheless, a more ecologically valid approach would be to consider bilingual children's preferences among the languages and accents that they hear and speak themselves, which can further illuminate the mechanisms that underlie social reasoning about language. Examining the social preferences of bilingual children living in the United States is especially interesting because, although bilingualism is not the norm, a rapidly growing number of children in the United States are being raised in bilingual environments (Ryan, 2013). According to the American Community Survey (Ryan, 2013), more than 60 million people over 5 years of age speak a language other than English at home and more than 300 different languages are spoken in the United

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