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Children's accent-based inferences depend on geographic background

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ABSTRACT

Young children make inferences about speakers based on their accents. Here, we show that these accent-based inferences are influenced by information about speakers' geographic backgrounds. In Experiment 1, 4- to 6-year-olds ($N = 60$) inferred that a speaker would be more likely to have the same cultural preferences as another speaker with the same accent than a speaker with a different accent; in Experiment 2 ($N = 90$), children made similar inferences about speakers' friendship preferences. Critically, in both experiments, children were less likely to make accent-based inferences when they were told that the speakers all came from different places (both experiments) or from the same place (Experiment 2). These results suggest that young children's accent-based inferences hinge on information about geographic background and provide insight into how and why children make accent-based inferences. These findings are also the first to show that young children use accent to infer *other people's* social preferences.

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Introduction

Suppose you meet two new people, one who shares your accent and another who speaks with a foreign accent. You might make very different inferences about the speakers based on their accents.

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For example, you might assume that the speaker who shares your accent is more likely than the foreign-accented speaker to share your cultural preferences. This would be justified because accent is informative about geographic background (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Labov, 2006; Moyer, 2004), and geographic background is predictive of cultural preferences and practices. But what if you learn that the speaker with the foreign accent has lived in your city for many years? Now you may be less certain about which speaker has more in common with you. This example suggests that although accents are a powerful source of information about others, accent-based inferences may critically hinge on information about geographic background.

Accent has widespread effects on children's preferences and inferences about others (e.g., Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011; Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007). For example, 5-year-olds would rather be friends with a speaker of their native accent than with a foreign-accented speaker (Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus, & Spelke, 2009). Accent-based social preferences have been investigated and replicated cross-culturally and with both monolingual and bilingual children (e.g., DeJesus, Hwang, Dautel, & Kinzler, 2017; Okumura, Kanakogi, Takeuchi, & Itakura, 2014; Souza, Byers-Heinlein, & Poulin-Dubois, 2013). Accent also influences children's inferences about others' cultural practices (Wagner, Clopper, & Pate, 2014; Weatherhead, White, & Friedman, 2016). Children aged 5 and 6 years match utterances spoken in their native accent (or spoken with a regional accent) with local cultural items (e.g., local clothes and houses) but match utterances spoken with a foreign accent to unfamiliar cultural items (Wagner et al., 2014). In addition, children aged 4 and 5 years link speakers who share a foreign accent to the same foods and games as one another but link speakers with differing foreign accents to different foods and games (Weatherhead et al., 2016).

In addition to these preferences and cultural inferences, young children use accent to infer others' geographic backgrounds. Preschool-aged children expect speakers with the same accent to come from similar places and expect speakers with different accents to come from different places (McCullough, Clopper, & Wagner, 2017b; Weatherhead et al., 2016). From 4 years of age, children use accent to infer whether a speaker shares their national background or has a different background; they do this when judging the speaker's national group membership (e.g., American or Korean), where the speaker lives, and where the speaker was born (DeJesus et al., 2017; Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013; Weatherhead, Friedman, & White, 2017). In addition, 5- and 6-year-olds choose native-accented speakers over foreign-accented speakers when judging who lives "around here" (Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013).

To summarize, accent affects children's preferences for speakers, their inferences about speakers' cultural practices, and their inferences about where speakers live and come from. However, as described above, accent-based inferences may result, at least in part, from accent serving as a proxy for geographic background. For example, although children normally infer that speakers who share a common accent also share cultural norms (Weatherhead et al., 2016), they might be less likely to infer this if informed that the speakers actually come from different places. Crucially, this would not require children to know which specific geographic locations are linked with different accents—knowledge that might not develop until later in childhood (McCullough, Clopper, & Wagner, 2017a). Instead, it would require only that children make the general assumption that accents are linked to geography.

If children's accent-based inferences hinge on information about geographic background, this will suggest that these inferences may often have a rational basis. For example, whereas children's social preferences for similarly accented individuals might in part reflect a preference for familiarity (DeJesus et al., 2017), they could also reflect inferences about potential relevance. Children might feel that a speaker from nearby is more likely to know and communicate information that is relevant than is a speaker from somewhere far away (see Begus, Gliga, & Southgate, 2016, for a related discussion regarding infants' preferences for native-language speakers over foreign-language speakers).

In this study, we examined whether information about geographic background influences two kinds of accent-based inferences in young children: inferences about speakers' cultural practices and inferences about speakers' social preferences. For the latter type of inference, we also aimed to show, for the first time, that young children consider accent in making inferences about *other people's* social preferences. As reviewed above, many previous studies have revealed that accent affects young children's own social preferences. However, the only study investigating effects of accent on children's judgments of others' social preferences (Arredondo & Gelman, 2017) found that children younger than

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