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The influence of language behavior in social preferences and selective trust of monolingual and bilingual children



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ABSTRACT

Experiences living in a community where people share more than one language may affect children's strategies to selective learning. Language mixing may be one type of speakers' characteristics that bilingual children, but not monolingual children, use to evaluate speakers. A total of 120 English-speaking monolingual ($n = 40$) and English–Mandarin bilingual ($n = 80$) 4- and 5-year-olds heard a pair of speakers each tell a story either with or without language mixing and indicated their preferences for either speaker in friendship, explicit judgment, and novel label endorsement. Bilingual children, but not their monolingual counterparts, preferred the single-language speaker to the language-mix speaker across different test questions. Our findings suggest that social relevance in the larger communicative context may contribute to the development of children's social preferences and selective learning based on certain characteristics of the speakers.

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Introduction

Research has shown that, from an early age, children are selective learners in various domains such as when learning object labels and functions, imitating actions, and following rules for games (e.g., Henderson, Graham, & Schell, 2015; see Koenig & Sabbagh, 2013, for a review; Luu, de Rosnay, &

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Harris, 2013; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2009). For example, in the context of word learning, when given a choice, children choose to learn new object labels from those who appear to be knowledgeable or confident about the label over those who are ignorant or not confident (Bergstra, de Mulder, & Coopmans, 2013; Sabbagh & Baldwin, 2001), from those who previously were accurate rather than inaccurate in providing object labels (Birch & Bloom, 2002; Birch, Vauthier, & Bloom, 2008; Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009; Scofield & Behrend, 2008), or from those whose opinions are congruent rather than in conflict with others (Corriveau, Fusaro, & Harris, 2009). Besides these epistemic cues, children also take into account other characteristics of the information source in determining whether the speaker is a trustworthy informant or not such as an informant's age (Jaswal & Neely, 2006) and how similar (Howard, Henderson, Carrazza, & Woodward, 2015; Taylor, 2013) or familiar (Corriveau & Harris, 2009) an informant is to the children.

There is growing literature on how children's word learning and social evaluation are also influenced by the linguistic characteristics of the informant such as an informant's language and accent (e.g., Buttelmann, Zmyj, Daum, & Carpenter, 2013; Corriveau, Kinzler, & Harris, 2013; Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011; Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013). For example, Kinzler et al. (2011) presented children with two informants, each telling a short story in either the children's native accent or a foreign accent. Children were then asked a series of questions measuring their preferences toward a particular informant. The researchers found that 4- and 5-year-old monolingual children selectively endorsed a native-accented speaker's demonstration of how a novel object is used over that of a foreign-accented speaker. Furthermore, 5- and 6-year-old monolingual children preferred to be friends with native-accented speakers and perceived them as "nicer" than foreign-accented speakers (Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013, Experiment 1). Corriveau et al. (2013) had monolingual preschoolers watch native- and foreign-accented English speakers labeling novel objects with different novel names. Children were found to prefer the names provided by the native-accented speaker to those provided by the foreign-accented speaker. Similarly, Akhtar, Menjivar, Hoicka, and Sabbagh (2012) found that English-speaking preschoolers endorsed labels from an English speaker significantly more than those from a foreign speaker (e.g., accept a novel label from the native speaker rather than the foreign speaker for a novel object). It is noteworthy that young children, even infants, do learn new words from foreign-language speakers (Bhagwat & Casasola, 2014; Koenig & Woodward, 2012). Nevertheless, children are more likely to endorse object labels from a speaker who shares the same language or linguistics characteristics as them than from a speaker who does not.

The majority of research on children's selective trust has been conducted with monolingual children in English-speaking populations. A recent study by Lucas, Lewis, Pala, Wong, and Berridge (2013) investigated selective learning in non-English-speaking monolingual children. The researchers compared performance of English, Chinese, and Turkish 3- and 4-year-olds in discriminating between reliable and unreliable speakers. An interesting difference between these populations is that Turkish children speak a language with evidential markers that indicate the source of someone's knowledge (e.g., whether one knows about an event because one has seen it happen or because one has been told about the event). Lucas and colleagues found that Turkish children were more likely to follow the accurate informant and demonstrated more sophisticated strategies in using these cues than the English and Chinese children. The results suggest that children's experiences with their own language(s) may affect the strategies they use to determine whether an individual is a reliable source for information.

In populations who speak more than one language, Akhtar et al. (2012) found that 3- and 4-year-olds with exposure to a second language were more likely to explicitly endorse foreign labels from a foreign speaker than were monolingual children, although Souza, Byers-Heinlein, and Poulin-Dubois (2013) found that both monolingual and bilingual 5- and 6-year-olds preferred to be affiliated with native-accented speakers rather than foreign-accented speakers. Nevertheless, whereas 4- to 6-year-old monolingual children preferred to be friends with monolingual speakers rather than bilingual speakers, their bilingual peers were equally likely to choose either monolingual or bilingual speakers to be friends with (Byers-Heinlein, Behrend, Said, Girgis, & Poulin-Dubois, 2016). Thus, experiences in speaking two languages or living in a community where people share more than one language can affect children's strategies to selective learning as well as their social preferences.

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