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Meta-analysis Shows Children Prefer People Who Speak like Them

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Something About the Way You Speak: A Meta-Analysis on Children's Linguistic-based Social Preferences

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Research shows that children prefer to befriend, listen to, and imitate people who speak similarly to them. While most of this research has been conducted on monolingual (speaking only one language) children from Western societies, a growing subset of research has begun examining whether this pattern holds for children from more diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A new meta-analysis including studies with monolingual as well as bilingual children helps to shed light on the range of factors that contribute to the development of linguistic-based biases in early childhood. Understanding these patterns can eventually guide efforts to diminish biases based on how one speaks.

The findings were published in a *Child Development* article written by researchers at the University of Queensland in Australia.

“Consistent with prior research, we found that infants and children overall prefer those who speak in the same accent, dialect or language as themselves,” said Jessica Spence, doctoral candidate, The University of Queensland. "Interestingly, we also found that bilingual children and children exposed to other accents, dialects and languages displayed just as much preference for speakers of their own linguistic variety—if not more—than monolingual children and those who were not exposed to other ways of speaking.”

The meta-analysis began with a literature search to find all the studies that have examined children’s linguistic-based social preferences and found 38 studies published between 1980 and 2020. The studies involved 2,680 infants and children ranging from 2 days old to 11 years of age with the following sample characteristics:

- 13 different countries (Australia, Brazil, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, and United States),
- Diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., working-, middle-, an upper class),

- Spoke 15 different primary languages (Basque, Cantonese, Dutch, English, French, German, Hawaiian Creole English, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish, Tagalog, and Xhosa), and
- Participants were identified by the studies as White, Mixed race, Asian descent, German, Japanese, White and Korean mix and Xhosa.

The meta-analysis examined the overall effect of linguistic cues on children's social preferences and also investigated how the mean age of the sample, bilingualism, exposure to non-native speech, cultural background, type of measure used to assess preferences (implicit, explicit behavioral, or explicit forced-choice) and type of linguistic cue (accent, dialect or language) influences children's linguistic-based social preferences. The findings suggest that cultural backgrounds did not impact children's preference for native over non-native speakers. Contrary to past assumptions, however, children raised in a diverse environment may have a greater awareness of linguistic-based group differences.

The authors recognize that while the findings show that infants and children generally favor native speakers over non-native speakers, the question of why they display this preference remains. "As the world becomes more globalized, it is more important than ever to consider how exposure to diversity can promote acceptance rather than amplify intergroup biases," says Kana Imuta, Assistant Professor, The University of Queensland.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Something About the Way You Speak: A Meta-Analysis on Children's Linguistic-based Social Preferences by Spence, J.L., Hornsey, M.J., and Imuta, K. (University of Queensland).
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