Being a team player: The influence of group membership(s) on children's lexical choices

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Language, like fashion and hairstyles, signals different aspects of identity, including the social groups/categories someone belongs to. The choice to say *undocumented immigrant* over *illegal alien* in the US, for example, signals to others which political groups/ideologies speakers associate themselves with. This ability to linguistically signal identity is made more complex by the fact that speakers are simultaneously members of multiple groups (e.g., gender, race, sports teams, etc.), which may have different (and sometimes conflicting) communication styles. Here, we investigated the influence of (multiple) group membership on 8-year-old, English-speaking children's lexical choices. While recent work has shown that children use a label dispreferred by the broader community more (e.g., *sofa* instead of *couch*) when members of their assigned "team" (red or green) also use that label (St. Pierre et al., 2024), in the current study, we examined children's word choices in a context withtwo available group cues, namely team assignment (yellow/green team) and gender (having the same gender as their teammates or opponents).

Children (N = 128) were first assigned to a team (yellow or green), and then participated in a virtual trivia game they believed involved two fellow teammates and three children from the opposing team (in fact, other children's responses were pre-recorded, experimenter-controlled audio files; see Fig. 1). On critical trials, objects had multiple correct labels (e.g., *blackboard* vs. *chalkboard*; see Table 1). Children heard two members from their team respond with one label, and two members from the other team respond with the other before answering themselves. We manipulated whether in-group members always produced the locally-preferred term or dispreferred term. In addition, we manipulated—though never explicitly mentioned—the gender of the (virtual) players, such that each participant either matched the gender of their teammates (and not their opponents; in-group gender-matched condition) or matched the gender of their opponents (and not teammates; in-group gender-mismatched condition). Thus, in the gender-mismatched condition, children were faced with the choice of using the label produced by their teammates, or the label produced by their same-gendered peers.

We ran a mixed effects logistic regression predicting the likelihood of producing a dispreferred label from in-group label (preferred, coded -0.5, and dispreferred, coded 0.5), in-group gender matching (in-group gender-matched, -0.5, in-group gender-mismatched, 0.5), and their interaction. Results revealed a significant main effect of in-group label, such that children were overall more likely to produce a dispreferred label if their in-group members did as well (β = 2.20, SE = 0.41, z = 5.31, p < .001). Interestingly, this difference was moderated by gender (β = -2.40, SE = 0.68, z = 3.56, p < .001), with children less likely to produce the same labels as their teammates if their teammates mismatched their gender (see Figure 2).

As children develop, they must learn how to use language to express their identity in a complex, multi-dimensional social world. In the current study, children *selectively* produced words based on the labels used by others, showing how social processes can guide language choices. Critically, children did not just defer to the labels of the teams they were explicitly assigned to, but also spontaneously weighed how much they aligned with their teammates along other social dimensions as well (e.g., gender). This work is the first to examine how children's membership in multiple groups can influence their linguistic choices.
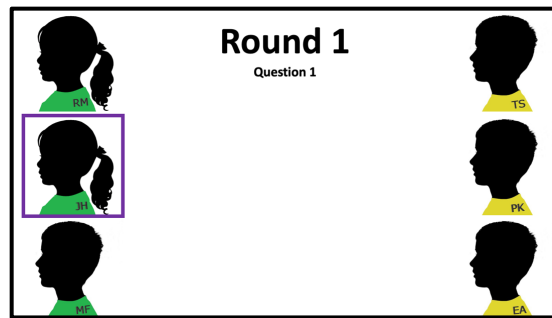
Figure 1. Example display for critical trials. The participant is on the lower left with their initials represented on their jersey/avatar. Player 02 on the in-group team (an experimenter-controlled recording) is currently responding to a question (e.g., "What do kids often get on their birthday, wrapped in paper with a bow on top?"), as indicated by purple outline.

Table 1. Items came from a previously normed list of word pairs. Preferred labels are those which first came to mind in more than 70% of children in the norming study (20-22 per pair); dispreferred labels needed to be recognized by at least 80% of children.

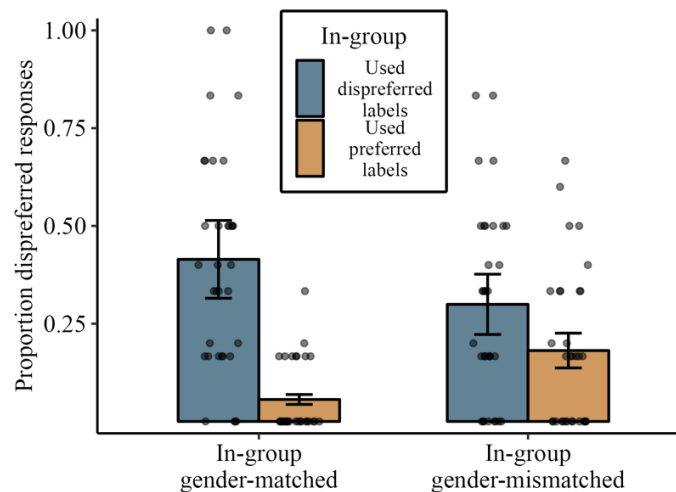| preferred	dispreferred	preferred	dispreferred
chalkboard	blackboard	couch	sofa
life jacket	life vest	sled	toboggan
grade 1	1st grade	dinner	supper
fishing rod	fishing pole	lollipop	sucker
rainboots	rubber boots	hot chocolate	hot cocoa
bunny	rabbit	jam	jelly
present	gift	icing	frosting
dirt	soil	jacket	coat

Figure 2. The proportion of trials in which children produced the dispreferred label. Overall, children were more likely to produce a dispreferred label when their teammates did as well. In addition, children were more likely to produce the same labels as their teammates (more dispreferred labels when their teammates produced dispreferred labels, and vice-versa) when their teammates matched their gender compared to when they mismatched.

References

St. Pierre, T., Jaffan, J., Chambers, C. G., & Johnson, E. K. (2024). The icing on the cake. Or is it frosting? The influence of group membership on children's lexical choices. *Cognitive Science*, *48*(2), e13410.