

Impact of Social Background on the Evaluation of Sociolinguistic Variables in French-speaking Children Aged 4 to 6



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Evaluation of Sociolinguistic Variables

□ In adults

- Identical evaluations within the speech community
(Labov, 1966, 1972, 2001; Trudgill, 1974)

□ In children

- Lafontaine (1986)
 - 123 pupils: 8, 12, 14, 18 years-old
 - From age 8: preference for standard variants (regional variables)
 - From age 12: preference for standard variants (sociolectal variables)
- Martino (1982)
 - 5 *working class* & 5 *lower middle class* children of 10 years-old
 - All children show preference for the standard variant

Evaluation of Sociolinguistic Variables

□ In children

- Chevrot, Beaud & Varga (2000)
 - 6-7 year-old children (12 workers' & 12 managers' children) & 10-12 year-old children (12 workers' & 12 managers' children)
 - No SES effect: uniformity of judgments
- Day (1980)
 - 87 pupils: kindergarten (5-6) & first grade (6-7) from 2 social backgrounds
 - Judgments in favour of Standard English increase for all children between kindergarten and first grade
 - Kindergarten children from the lowest social background express preference for the local dialect

Hypothesis (Day, 1980; Lafontaine, 1986):

Normative discourse of the school system instils a set of common rules in children that valorise standard variants

Aim of the Current Study

- According to the studies cited:
 - From age 6-7, judgments on sociolinguistic variables are uniform
- To examine the impact of social background upon the evaluation of different French sociolinguistic variants in younger children
- To confirm the Principle of Uniform Evaluation (Labov, 2001)

Methodology

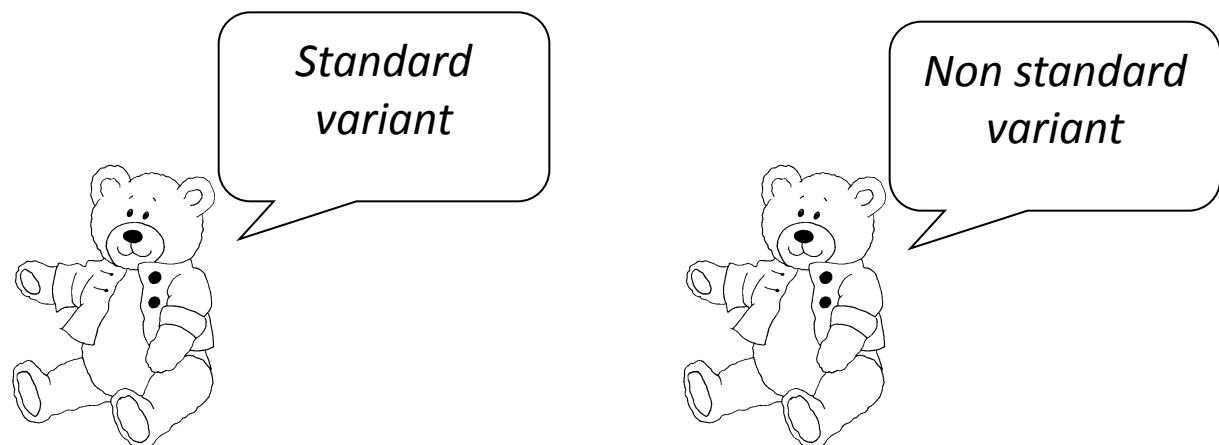
□ Participants

- 150 children
- 2 age groups: 4-5 years old (n=73) & 5-6 years old (n= 77)
- 3 SES groups: higher-SES, middle-SES & lower-SES
 - Based on the two parents' occupation
 - Score 1: unskilled workers
 - Score 2: intermediate professions and employees
 - Score 3: managers and knowledge workers
 - Higher-SES: parental SES-index of 2.5 or 3
 - Middle-SES: parental SES-index of 2
 - Lower-SES: parental SES-index of 1 or 1.5

Methodology

□ Judgment of acceptability task

- Allows us to understand speakers intuitions regarding linguistic utterances (Kemmer & Barlow, 2000)
- From as young as 2, children are able to answer judgment of acceptability tasks successfully (McDaniel & Cairns, 1998)
- Determine which one of the two linguistic forms heard was correct



Sociolinguistic Variables

□ Phonological

- Presence/absence of word final post-consonantal /R/ and of the /R/ in *parce que*
 - Une fenêtre fermée vs Une fenêt' fermée
(*a closed window*)
- Realisation/non realisation of optional liaison
 - C'est T un pyjama vs C'est Ø un pyjama
(*It's a pyjama*)

□ Morphological

- Presence/absence of the negative particle *ne*
 - Je n'ai pas le temps vs J'ai pas le temps
(*I don't have the time*)
- Alternation of clitic object pronouns *le, la, les/y*
 - Il le fera demain vs Il y fera demain
(*He will do it tomorrow*)

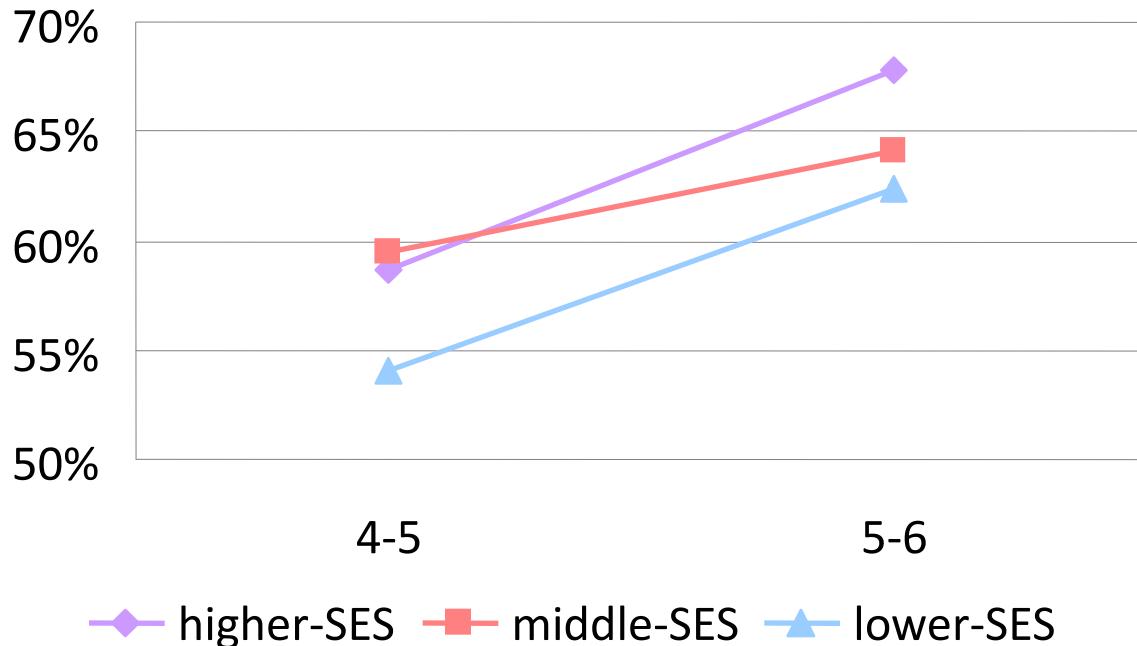
Sociolinguistic variables

□ Syntactical

- Alternation "ce que"/"qu'est-ce que" in subordinate clauses
 - Regardez ce que je fais vs Regardez qu'est-ce que je fais
(*Look at what I'm doing*)
- Absence/presence of "est-ce que" in subordinate clauses
 - Je sais quand Pierre va venir vs Je sais quand est-ce que Pierre va venir
(*I know when Pierre is going to come*)
- Alternation "qui + verb"/"c'est qui qui + verb" in questions
 - Qui a dessiné ça ? vs C'est qui qu'a dessiné ça ?
(*Who drew that?*)
- Alternation "X + est"/"c'est + X" in subordinate clauses
 - Tu sais où est la patinoire ? vs Tu sais c'est où la patinoire ?
(*Do you know where the ice-rink is?*)
- Alternation *dont/que* in relative clauses
 - Voilà la fille dont je te parle vs Voilà la fille que je te parle
(*Here is the girl that I have been telling you about*)
- For each variable: 4 pairs of standard *vs* non standard sequences judged

In all, 36 pairs judged

Judgments in Favour of Standard Variants (Parental SES)



Higher-SES	63%	n= 55
Middle-SES	62%	n= 40
Lower-SES	58.5%	n= 55

age effect
(Anova: $F_{1,144} = 17.49$, $p < 0.0001$)

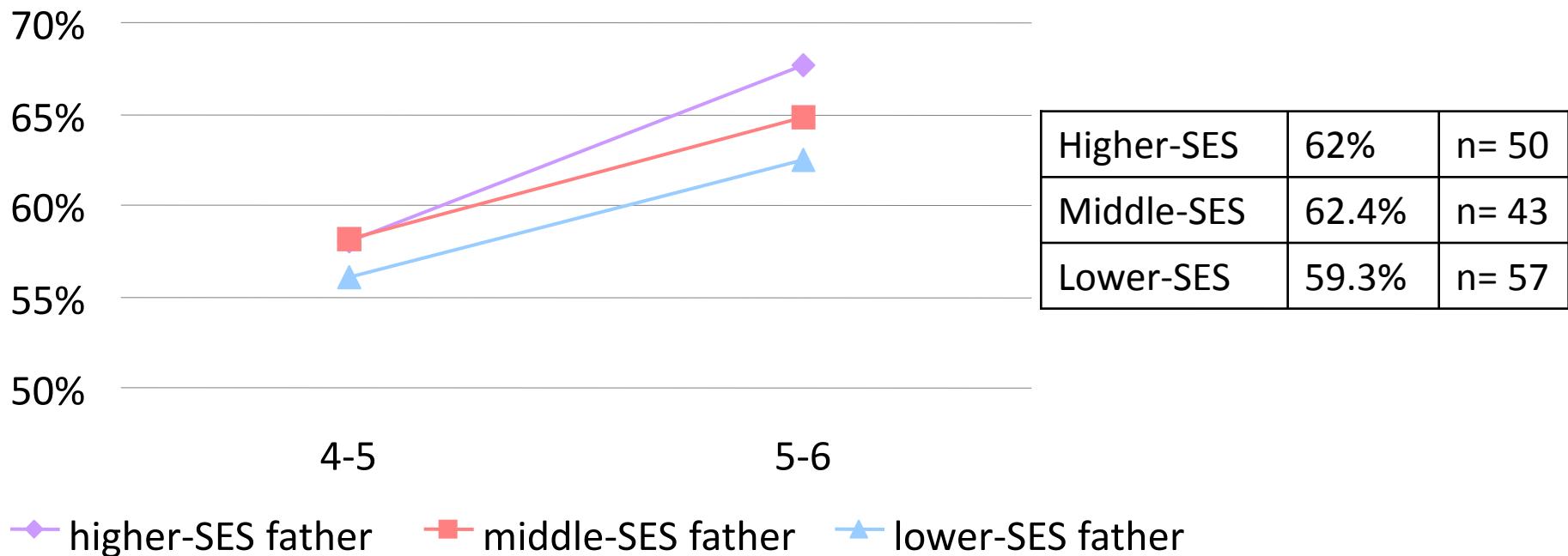
👉 **increase between 4-5 and 5-6**

no interaction age*SES
(Anova: $F_{2,144} = 0.52$, $p = 0.5937$)

SES effect
(Anova: $F_{2,144} = 2.80$, $p = 0.0644$)

👉 **lower-SES < middle-SES < higher-SES**

Judgments in Favour of Standard Variants (Father's SES)



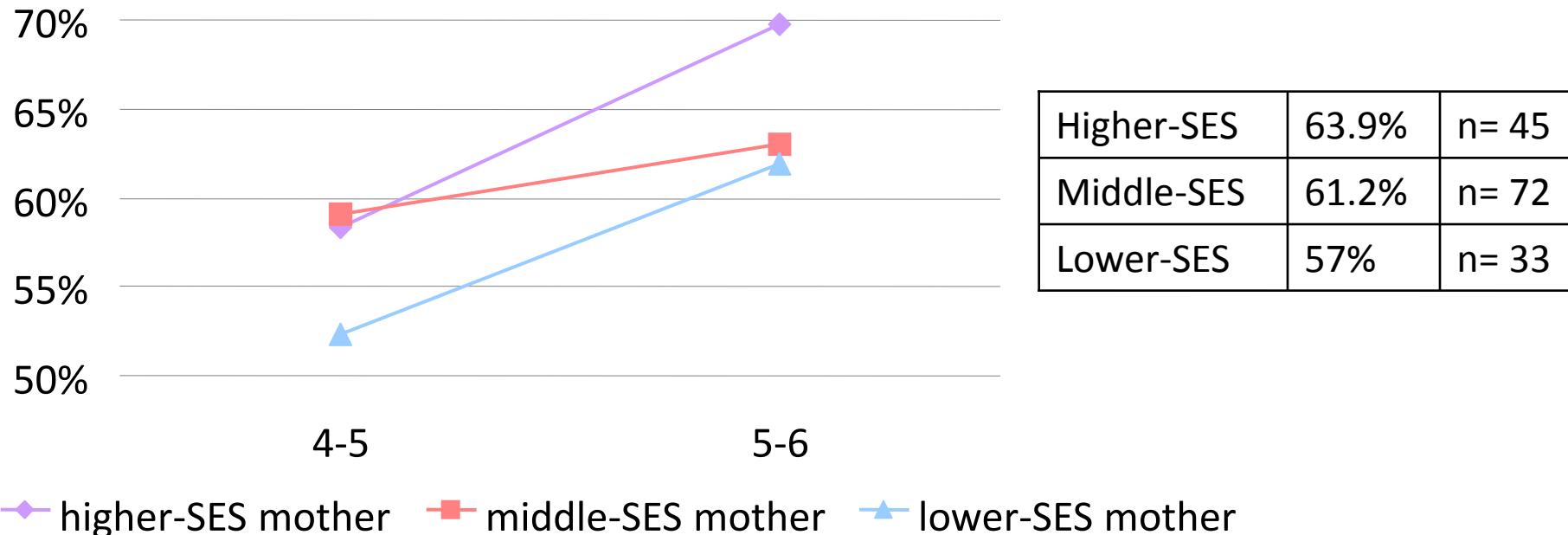
age effect
(Anova: $F_{1,144} = 18$, $p < 0.0001$)

👉 **increase between 4-5 and 5-6**

no SES effect
(Anova: $F_{2,144} = 1.33$, $p = 0.2678$)

no interaction age*SES
(Anova: $F_{2,144} = 0.52$, $p = 0.5937$)

Judgments in Favour of Standard Variants (Mother's SES)



age effect
(Anova: $F_{1,144} = 17.49$, $p < 0.0001$)

↳ **increase between 4-5 and 5-6**

Mann-Whitney: $U = 1842.500$, $p = 0.0003$

no interaction age*SES
(Anova: $F_{2,144} = 1.68$, $p = 0.1891$)

SES effect
(Anova: $F_{2,144} = 3.63$, $p = 0.0290$)

↳ **lower-SES < middle-SES < higher-SES**

Kruskal-Wallis: $H = 6.296$, $p = 0.0429$

Discussion

- **In young children: social stratification of evaluation**
 - Influenced by mother's SES

- **Judgments may result from frequency of variants in input**

Discussion

□ Contrast between maternal and paternal child-directed speech (CDS)

	Maternal CDS	Paternal CDS
Speech during interaction (Bernstein Ratner, 1988)	+	-
Length of mutual dialogues (Perlmann & Gleason, 1993)	+	-
Frequency of responses to a child's utterances (Perlmann & Gleason, 1993)	+	-
Frequency of questions addressed to the child (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006)	+	-
Adjustment of language to child's needs (McLaughlin, White, McDevitt & Raskin, 1983)	+	-
Quantity of speech addressed to child (Davidson & Snow, 1996 ; Leaper, Anderson & Sanders, 1998; Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006)	+	-

Mothers used almost four times as many words as fathers (Matthews et al, 2004)

Discussion

□ **Maternal child-directed speech according to SES**

(Hoff, 2002, 2003; Rowe, 2008)

□ **Higher SES-mothers**

- Greater lexical diversity
- Greater syntactic diversity
- Longer conversations with their child
- Ask more questions

- Difference in the quantity and the nature of the input have an impact on language development

Discussion

- Barbu et al (to appear)
 - 185 children aged between 2 and 6 (upper- and lower-class)
 - Production & evaluation of optional liaisons
 - Positive and significant correlation between production & evaluation at 4-5 & 5-6 whatever the SES

- From an early age, acquisition of production & evaluation patterns is not directed by an awareness of the social value of variants but rather by familiarity with these variants

Discussion

- **Early social differences could be transient and linked to input**

- **From age 6-7, uniform evaluation of variants** (Day, 1980; Chevrot & al., 2000)
 - Impact of school
 - Learning to write
 - Learning the norm (standard language)

Thank you