

The dynamics of standard-dialect relations: a developmental perspective

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Language attitudes towards the youngest members of a speech community (children)...

- ascribe a social identity to children
- measure socially relevant variation, i.e., how different ways of speaking by children are socially evaluated
(important for the study of variation in acquisition!)
- likely reveal how a particular language variety is changing

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Formal attitude study in Antwerp, Belgium



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The Antwerp dialect in officially Dutch-speaking Flanders

- is alive and well
- carries high local and extra-local prestige
- is not uniform across speakers (social differences)
- is informal, oral, local in-group (but gaining territory!), old, a solidarity marker
- is not taught at school though teachers may use dialect in oral communication with children
- co-exists with the regional Standard, "beschaafd Nederlands": it is recent (partly imported), written, more formal, not local in-group, a school model, used in the media, necessary for upward mobility

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Method

- formal attitude instrument, using ethnographically determined terms
- 5-point Likert scales (+ 'not applicable')
- speech stimuli consisting of recordings of 4-year-olds telling a short story based on the same animal picture book
- jury of adults (aged 20 to 40 yrs) rated children's speech stimuli in a group setting
- jury 1 (n = 306) rated 4 speech stimuli, jury 2 (n = 101) rated another 4 stimuli (*total n = 407*)

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One speech community is in focus: all participants are from the greater Antwerp area and have a variety of Dutch as their L1

- the 4 girls and 4 boys who supplied the stimuli
- the 8 mothers who elicited stories from children (these stories were used as stimuli)
- the 104 people who supplied definitions for the evaluative terms
- the 407 raters
- the main investigator (instrumental in stimuli selection)

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Analysis (1)

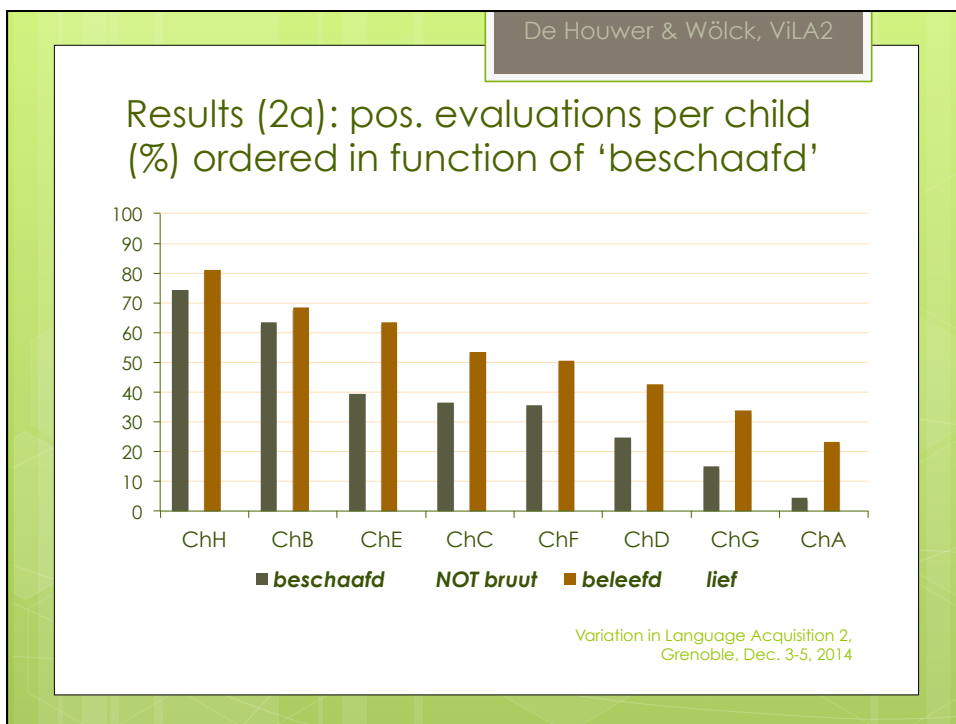
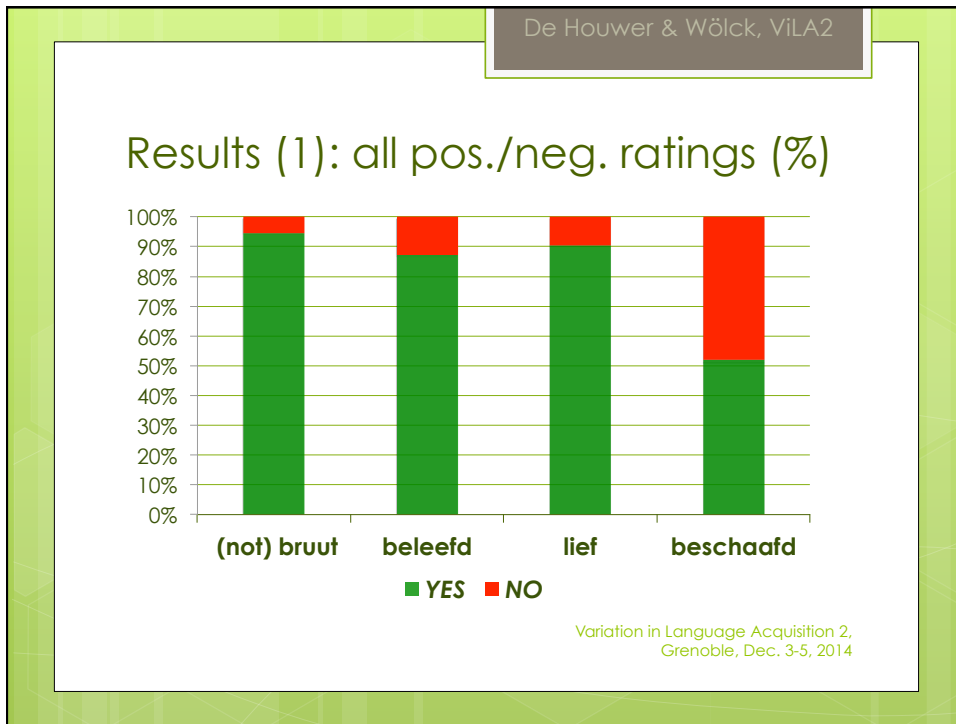
- data from 2 juries were collapsed, because the results were very similar
- data were collapsed for all raters as there were no major differences in function of age, gender, parent status, and teaching interest
- the results focus on committed responses only (i.e., not those put on the neutral position on the Likert scale)
- there were hardly any 'not applicable' responses

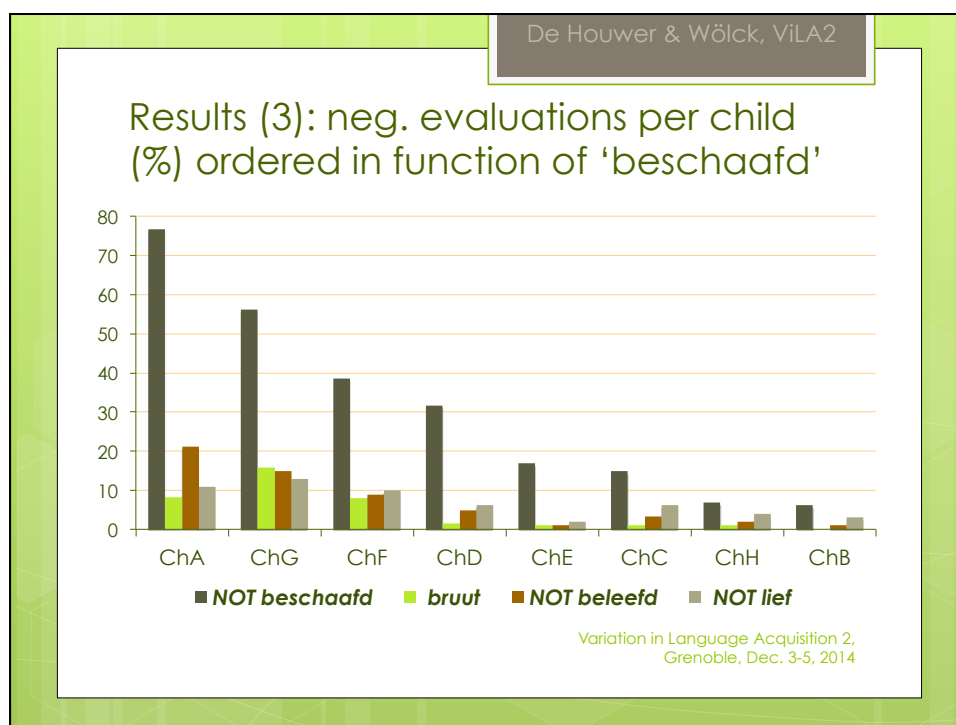
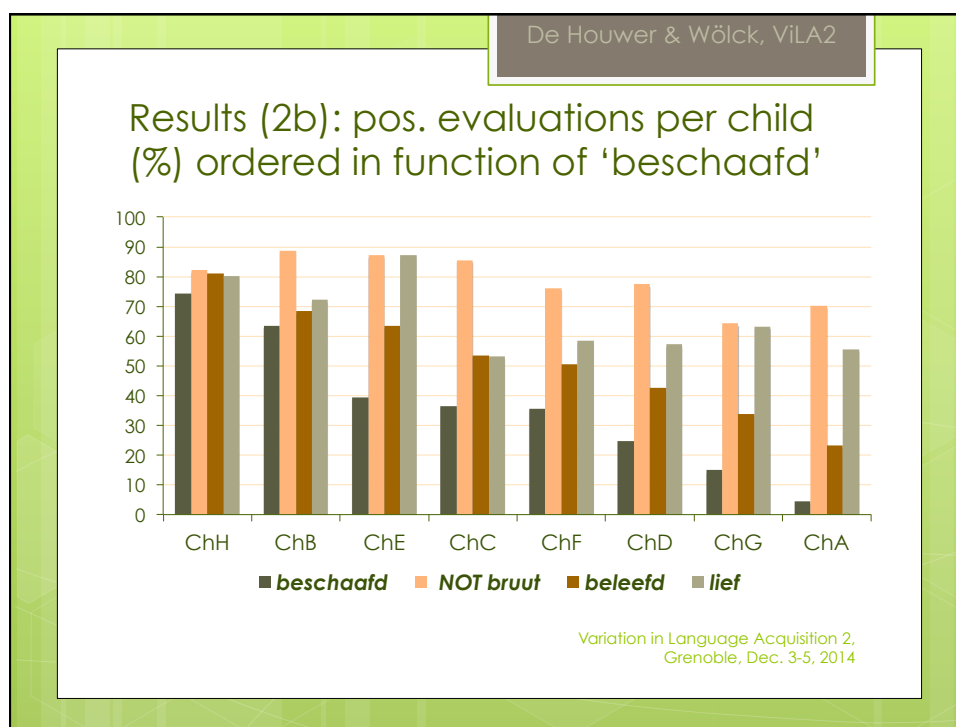
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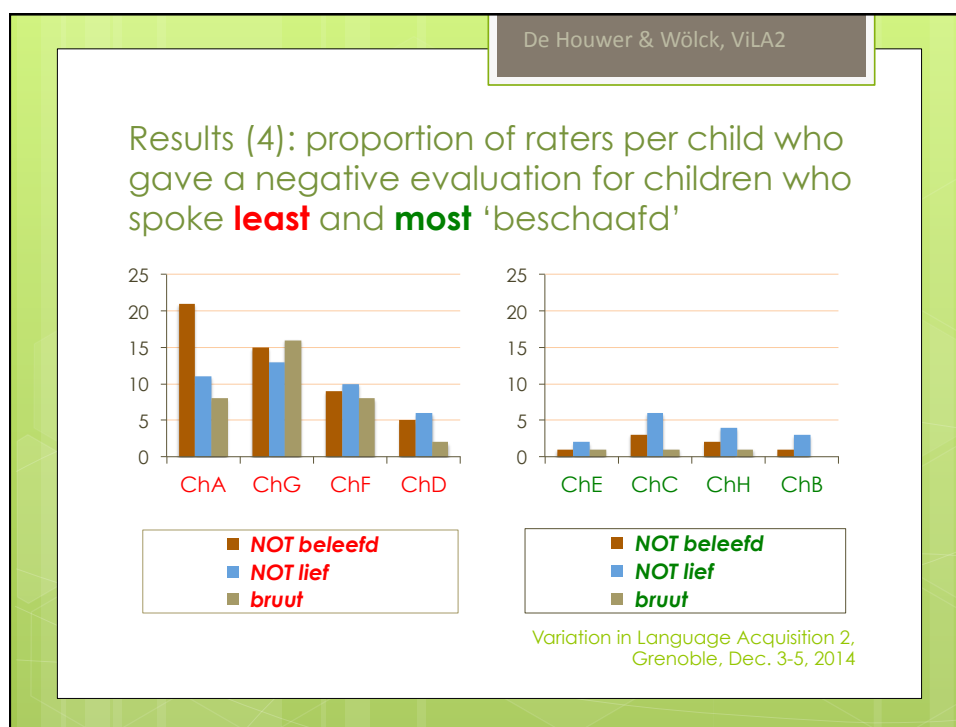
Analysis (2)

- focus on ratings for 3 personality traits:
 - **brut (rough, aggressive): NEGATIVE**
 - **beleefd (polite): POSITIVE**
 - **lief (sweet, cute): POSITIVE**
- in comparison to ratings for
 - **beschaafd Nederlands (Standard Dutch): ??**

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Discussion and conclusion

- Antwerp adults usually rate Antwerp 4-year-olds very positively on three personality traits: **overall positive bias**
- no such bias is noticeable for speaking 'beschaafd'
- the four children who were assessed as speaking the least standard were the most negatively rated for personality traits, in spite of an overall positive attitude towards 4-year-olds

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- there is a positive correlation and interdependency between children's perceived use of the Standard and favorable social evaluation by adults
- the direction of this correlation (causality), however, is unclear

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The finding that Antwerp adults do not like 4-year-olds to speak dialect is in line with other sociolinguistic findings regarding children's language in Antwerp

- overt attitudes towards dialect use by 4-yr-olds are negative: "Dialect is not for children" (Kuppens & De Houwer 2006)
- language input to Antwerp 4-yr-olds has fewer dialect features than speech to older children and adults (De Houwer 2003)

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- The fact that young children who speak in a more dialectal way are less appreciated may have repercussions for children's development and education

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- the results illustrate an increased preference for the Standard *at the expense of* the dialect

This is another indication that the Standard has become necessary for wider communication

Does this mean the beginning of the end for the still vibrant Antwerp dialect? TIME WILL TELL...

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DANKJEWEL!! [Standard Dutch]
MERCIKES!! [Antwerpian]

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