

# Language may be dominant social marker for young children

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UChicago researchers showed children images and voices of a child and two adults, and asked, "Which adult will the child grow up to be?" White children chose an English-speaking African-American man rather than a French-speaking white man, showing that their sense of identity was more dependent on language than on race. Credit: Katherine Kinzler

Children's reasoning about language and race can take unexpected turns, according to University of Chicago researchers, who found that for younger white children in particular, language can loom larger than race in defining a person's identity.

Researchers showed children images and voices of a child and two [adults](#)

, and asked, "Which adult will the child grow up to be?" Children were presented with a challenge: One adult matched the child's race, and one matched the child's language, but neither matched both. For example, children saw a white child speaking English, a black adult speaking English and a white adult speaking French. The exercise was intended to gauge whether the children perceived language or race as more central to an individual's identity over time. As would be expected, 9- and 10-year-old children chose the adult who matched the featured child's race. By that age, they understood that [skin color](#) is relatively stable, whereas language can be learned.

Five- and six-year-old English-speaking white children's responses were a bit more surprising: Most of those children chose the language match, even though this meant that the featured child would have needed to change race.

In explaining the puzzling choices of the 5- and 6-year-old white children, Katherine Kinzler, the Neubauer Family Assistant Professor in [Psychology](#) at UChicago, and lead author on the paper published in [Developmental Science](#), said. "From a child's perspective, language offers many of the characteristics of a biologically determined or inherited category. Children usually speak the same language as their families, and they likely do not remember the time as infants that they spent learning a [native language](#)."

This finding builds on past research by Kinzler and colleagues, which found that children are highly attentive to others' [accent](#) and language: Indeed, language can be more important than race in guiding young children's social preferences for others.

Interestingly, when African American 5- and 6-year-old children were shown the same photos and voices, they performed like the older white children and made a match based on racial identity. "Children of

different racial groups may have different experiences with race as a meaningful social category, which could contribute to their performance on this tasks," said Jocelyn Dautel, co-author of the study and a UChicago graduate student.

Other research helps explain why race may be a more salient category for young African American children than for young white children, Dautel said. Research has shown that children who are minorities are more aware of prejudice and stereotypes, and that children of different groups may have different socialization experiences and conversations about race.

In the Development Science paper, entitled "Children's Essentialist Reasoning about Language and Race," the two researchers showed the same stimuli to four groups of children. Three groups were tested in Chicago: 9- and 10-year-old white children, 5- and 6-year-old white children, and 5- and 6-year-old African American children. A final group of 5- and 6-year-old white children were tested in northern Wisconsin; these children lived in a more racially homogenous group than the Chicago children. The researchers found:

- When 9- and 10-year old-white children were asked whether an English-speaking white boy was likely to grow up to be an English-speaking black man or a French-speaking white man, they were more likely to choose the white, French-speaking adult.
- In contrast, when 5- and 6-year-old white children were shown photographs and asked who the white English-speaking white boy was likely to grow up to be, they were more likely to choose an English-speaking black man over a French-speaking white man. This was the case among the 5- and 6-year-old white children in both Chicago and Wisconsin.
- Finally, when African American 5- and 6-year-old children were

presented with the same tasks, they were likely to choose the white, French-speaking adult (the race match). These children's responses mirrored those of the older white children, rather than the younger white children.

The paper clarifies how researchers can better understand how young children develop understandings of social categories, Kinzler said. Some theorists have maintained that categorization occurs independently of culture, while others contend that the categories are the result of cultural influence. Kinzler said the work she did with Dautel suggests that both explanations may be valid: Although some understandings about social distinctions are formed early in childhood, others, such as understanding about [race](#), may be highly

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