

# Selective Trust in Japanese Preschoolers between Foreign and Native Language Speakers\*

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## Abstract

Recent studies indicate that preschoolers sensitively pick up and use the accent or linguistic (in)competence of other speakers in judging whom to trust, and tend to interpret people with lower linguistic ability (in a given language) as less sociable, friendly, or kind. This study examined Japanese monolingual preschoolers aged 4 and 5 (N = 52) to capture their selective judgments between foreign language- and native language-speaking puppets and the extent to which they generalize these judgments. Children saw a video clip in one of two conditions; in the Japanese-Japanese condition, a pair of puppets spoke in Japanese, while in the Japanese-Foreign condition, one spoke in Spanish. One of the Japanese-speaking puppets was shown to misunderstand a label, demonstrating a degree of linguistic incompetence in Japanese. Children judged whom to trust on four different types of knowledge and characteristics. The results suggest that Japanese preschoolers are harsher in their judgments on Japanese speakers making linguistic mistakes than on foreign speakers, and that they are aware that linguistic knowledge is not related to the person's other social characteristics or preferences.

幼児は話し相手の言語的能力やアクセントに対して敏感性をもち、それに基づいて相手の信頼性を判断できるだけでなく、言語的な能力が低い人物は他の社会性、優しさといった性格や特徴についても劣っていると判断することが近年の研究で示されている。本研究では4-5歳の日本語モノリンガルの幼児(N=52)の外国語を話すパペットと日本語を母語とするパペットとの間にみられる選択的信頼性と判断の一般化を調べた。二条件が設定され、日本語-日本語条件ではパペットは両方とも日本語を話し、日本語-外国語条件では片方がスペイン語を話した。どちらの条件でも一方の日本語話者のパペットがラベルを誤解するという行動をし、言語的な能力が低いことを示した。幼児は四つの知識や特徴についてどのパペットを信頼するか判断した。日本人幼児は外国語話者よりも日本語母語話者が言語的間違いを犯すほうをより厳しく判断すること、そして、言語的能力が他の社会的特徴や、好み等には関連しないという理解があることが示唆された。

**Key Words:** Japanese children, selective trust, conventionality, native speakers

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## 1. Introduction

Children absorb knowledge like sponges, learning knowledge about many things, including language, from their surroundings. Social learning from a very early stage of life (e.g., Bandura, 1965; Csibra & Gergely, 2006; Tomasello, Kruger, & Ratner, 1993), and they are not indifferent about the nature of their informants. A number of recent studies suggest that preschoolers have “selective trust”: they are able to judge and weigh information by the perceived degree of accountability of their informants. For instance, preschoolers tend to trust people with correct linguistic knowledge more than those without it (Harris, 2007; Koenig, Clement, & Harris, 2004; Koenig & Harris, 2005) and tend to feel that linguistically competent people are also trustworthy in terms of other social characteristics such as kindness (Brosseau-Liard & Birch, 2010). This is known as “halo effect”: people tend to interpret that a person is favorable if he/she shows other positive characteristics, such as looks. This overgeneralization of a person’s character by children on the basis of linguistic accountability is also reported in Kinzler, Corriveau, and Harris (2011), where children judged that a person who was correct when labeling objects would also be good at other things and also be nicer.

Informant accountability has been controlled in past studies by making one of the two characters appearing in a scenario less linguistically reliable than the other. From the findings of these studies, it has been seen that children aged 4-5 years can correctly choose the informant who provides a linguistically correct label as the one from whom to learn other linguistic labels.

However, all children tested in those studies resided in multicultural countries, such as U.S., and though this was not accounted for as a variable, they were likely to have been exposed to people with foreign accent or speaking foreign languages. In the study by Kinzler et al. (2011) conducted in the U.S., children mistrusted a person with a Spanish accent, but this may not have been solely due to the low linguistic reliability of that person; the children’s experiences with people with foreign accents in their lives may have built different expectations about foreign people. This may have contributed towards their understanding of what their own culture consists of and possibly also promoted the understanding that anything that deviates from their shared conventionality (Diesendruck & Markson, 2011) does not deserve complete trust. This understanding of shared conventionality has been said to drive social learning at the early stages of children’s lives (Birch & Bloom, 2002; Diesendruck & Markson, 2001; Graham, Stock, & Henderson, 2006), and to be useful in that context as a primitive but economical strategy for children who are too young to understand complex aspect of whom to trust and when.

It is important to notice that in order to judge what does and does not belong to their own culture, children must adequately understand their own and other cultures. Knowledge or at least awareness of the existence of other cultures as well as one’s own is essential before such a contrast can be established. The present study is a part a larger study, which will attempt to clarify the effects of exposure to foreign cultures and languages on children’s learning by comparing monocultural Japanese children (without much exposure to foreign cultures or languages) and children being brought up multiculturally (e.g. children who attend international preschools in Japan). The present study looks at Japanese preschoolers in the monocultural context only. The aim of the present study to investigate whether Japanese preschoolers can judge and weigh information differently on the basis of its source, between foreign-language speakers and native Japanese speakers and determine the types of knowledge that they generalize their judgment for.

In order to elicit the children’s judgments, puppets speaking native and foreign language were presented in a contrasting way; to identify the halo effect of the judgments, children were

asked a series of questions about the puppets' knowledge and characteristics, some of which can be inferred from their behavior and language and others of which are not as obvious or inferable.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

A total of 73 children aged 4–5 years from three nursery schools in city K in Japan participated in this study. All the children spoke Japanese as their first and only language (i.e., they were monolingual). The number of children included in the final set for analysis was 52 (mean age = 61.01 months; SD = 3.09 months, range = 54.40–65.00 months). The other 21 children were excluded from the final sample because they failed to complete the experimental tasks due to problems such as being unable to concentrate on the tasks, too shy, and extremely nervous about responding. All children participated with the consent of a parent and any information that might connect to individuals was processed in appropriate manners to protect privacy.

### 2.2 Materials

Each child was assigned to either a Japanese-Japanese or a Japanese-Foreign Language condition in which they watched video clips individually. The basic scenario shown in the video clips was as follows. In the “Japanese-Japanese” condition, both puppets spoke in Japanese, while in the “Japanese-Foreign Language” condition, one of them spoke in Spanish, which none of the children understood. After greeting the child, the puppets acted differently depending on the conditions; label and object usage condition whose details are explained below. After the puppets introduced themselves, a set of three items were placed in front of them and a third (female) voice asked them if they knew which one of the three items was a \_\_, for example a “banana.” In both language conditions, one of the puppets made a mistake by picking up the wrong item. In the Japanese-Japanese condition, the one choosing the wrong item could be either of the two puppets, but in the Japanese-Foreign condition, it was always the foreign language-speaking puppet. To avoid side preference bias, the position of the puppets was counterbalanced.

### 2.3 Procedure

Each child was taken by a teacher or the experimenter to a quiet space away from the other children. There, the child watched the video clip. Then, they were asked about the following abilities and characteristics of the puppets. Below, the phrases in brackets are the English translation of the questions and the original Japanese questions.

- a) Linguistic ability (“Who do you think knows the name of this [novel object]?” “Dare ga kore no namae o shitteru to omou?”);
- b) Object knowledge (“Who do you think knows how to use this [novel object]?” “Dare ga kore no tsukaikata shitteru to omou?”);
- c) Kindness (“Who do you think would help this little hippo, who is lost and looking for his mom?” “Kono kabasan wa maigo nano, okaasan o sagashiteimasu. Kono kabasan tasukete kureru nowa dare kana?”); and
- d) Preference for things (“Who do you think likes watching TV?” “Dare ga TV o miru no ga suki da to omou?”).

Children were encouraged to respond verbally; to facilitate responses in children who were reluctant to do so, four picture cards depicting each puppet, two puppets together, and a question mark ‘?’ were shown for them to point at. Questions b) and c) have nothing to do with the puppets’ ability to speak language or their knowledge of object use; they were instead asked to see if there was a halo effect of the puppets’ knowledge or their other characteristics on the children.

### 3. Results

Overall responses are presented in Table 1 below. To simplify the discussion, the puppet that chose the correct item in the label condition is referred to as “correct” henceforth. Since  $\chi^2$  tests conducted across the two language conditions (Japanese-Japanese and Japanese-Foreign) yielded non-significant results, all analyses were done within a single “Language” condition.

Table 1: Children’s responses by Type

Question Type	Language Condition	Response Types			
		Correct	Incorrect	Both	Don’t know
a) Linguistic	Japanese–Japanese	19	4	2	2
	Japanese–Foreign	12	8	1	4
b) Object	Japanese–Japanese	19	5	0	3
	Japanese–Foreign	14	5	2	4
c) Kindness	Japanese–Japanese	12	11	4	0
	Japanese–Foreign	9	8	5	3
d) Preference	Japanese–Japanese	12	12	3	0
	Japanese–Foreign	9	7	8	1

The proportions of three responses—“correct,” “incorrect,” and “both”—in each question type were compared with the  $\chi^2$  test results. Ryan’s method ( $\alpha=.05$ ) was used for multiple comparisons. The details of the analyses are in the following subsections.

#### 3.1 Linguistic Knowledge

##### JAPANESE–JAPANESE CONDITION

A  $\chi^2$  test for the three response types found a significant difference ( $\chi^2(2) = 20.72, p < .01$ ). Multiple comparisons revealed that more children choose the “correct performer” in comparison to the “incorrect” or “both” options (both  $p < .01$ ). There was no statistical difference between the number of children choosing the “incorrect” puppet and “both” (n.s.). Thus, the Japanese-speaking puppet that knew the linguistic label was trusted the most in terms of linguistic knowledge.

##### JAPANESE–FOREIGN CONDITION

There was an overall difference in the proportions of the three responses ( $\chi^2(2) = 8.86, p < .01$ ). Namely, while there was no significant difference between the “correct” and “incorrect” responses (n.s.), more children chose the “correct” puppet than who chose “both” ( $p < .01$ ).

Thus, there seemed to be no difference in trust between the Japanese- and foreign language-speaking puppets. They were trusted equally in terms of linguistic knowledge.

### 3.2 Object Knowledge

#### JAPANESE–JAPANESE CONDITION

A  $\chi^2$  test for the three response types found a significant difference ( $\chi^2(2) = 24.25, p < .01$ ). Multiple comparisons showed that more children chose the “correct” performer to the other two choices (both  $p < .01$ ) for object knowledge. No difference was found between the numbers of children choosing “incorrect” and “both” (n.s.).

Thus, children trusted the Japanese-speaking puppet that demonstrated better Japanese language knowledge for its object knowledge, too.

#### JAPANESE–FOREIGN CONDITION

The results were similar to the responses for the label question. There was an overall difference ( $\chi^2(2) = 11.14, p < .01$ ), but no statistical difference between the number of children choosing the “correct” and “incorrect” puppets (n.s.). Instead, fewer children chose “both” in comparison to those who chose “correct” ( $p < .01$ ).

Thus, the children trusted both the correct, Japanese performer and the foreign, incorrect performer for their object knowledge. That is, linguistic incapability did not affect the children's judgment on the puppets' object knowledge.

### 3.3 Kindness

#### JAPANESE–JAPANESE CONDITION

There was no overall difference in the proportions of the three responses ( $\chi^2(2) = 4.22, n.s.$ ). Thus, the linguistic knowledge exhibited by the puppet did not affect the children's judgment of its kindness. In other words, children were indifferent about which puppet to trust, showing an overall random pattern.

#### JAPANESE–FOREIGN CONDITION

Similar to the results for the Japanese-Japanese condition, there was no overall statistical difference in the responses for the Japanese-Foreign condition ( $\chi^2(2) = 0.25, n.s.$ ). Again, the linguistic knowledge of the puppet did not exert a perceptible influence on the children's judgment of kindness.

### 3.4 Preferences

#### JAPANESE–JAPANESE CONDITION

A significant difference was found in the proportions of the three responses ( $\chi^2(2) = 6.00, p < .01$ ). After multiple comparisons, it was found that there was no difference between the number of children choosing the “correct” and “incorrect” puppets (n.s.); instead, the difference was attributable to the fact that fewer children chose “both” than the other choices ( $p < .01$ ).

#### JAPANESE–FOREIGN CONDITION

No overall difference was found in this condition ( $\chi^2(2) = 0.25, p < .01$ ). Thus, there was no difference between the selection of any of the options; the pattern was random.

## 4. General Discussion

The results from the experiments reveal that Japanese 4–5 year-old children's assumptions about the knowledge and characteristics of others based on their linguistic ability differs in some ways depending on their knowledge and characteristics.

When a Japanese speaker makes a mistake in understanding a label, that person is seen as unreliable for other linguistic knowledge as well as object knowledge. However, this generalization does not extend to the person's non-knowledge-related characteristics, such as kindness and preferences. This is to say, Japanese preschoolers of this age are aware that people's linguistic knowledge is not necessarily related to their other characteristics.

However, there was limited exception in the case of tool use. This may be because that tool use knowledge constitutes a very large part of cultural knowledge, and parallels linguistic knowledge to a high degree. That is, the use of the same language often indicates the same culture and customs. This trend was in line with the findings from other studies; children have been reported to trust the object knowledge of others based on their language, on the rationale provided above (Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2010). However, in the case of Kinzler et al.'s study, the contrast was made between native and foreign-accented speakers.

Let's now look at the findings from the Japanese-Foreign condition. With regard to linguistic and object knowledge, children chose both the correct, Japanese speaker and the incorrect, foreign speaker; this response pattern is different from that in the Japanese-Japanese condition. That is, children of this age treat the foreign speaker differently from a native language speaker. For the other characteristics, in contrast, no difference was found in the responses. This, again, suggests that children of this age are aware that characteristics such as kindness and preference are not affected by a person's linguistic knowledge even when he/she is foreign and also that some children may think that being a foreign-language speaker does not imply less linguistic knowledge or object knowledge.

This part of the results is very different from what has been found in other studies. Children in this study were found to be harsher on a Japanese-speaking puppet than a foreign language speaking one, while past studies, more specifically the results of Kinzler et al. suggest that children are very sensitive to the foreign aspect (accent) of a person and trust him/her less on other knowledge. This is to say that in their study, a foreign accent functioned as a signal for children to judge a person as belonging to another culture, hence less trustworthy.

A question arises here: were the children in this study able to pick up this "signal" just by listening to a foreign language? Even if they did, it is not necessarily clear that they would interpret it in the same "negative" way as has been seen in other studies. There are two possible reasons for children's non-negative judgments. The first possible reason is that Japanese children of this age think highly of a foreign language and its speaker. As explained earlier, Japanese preschoolers in general are much less exposed to foreigners than those in Western countries, and the social value placed on foreign language(s) and their speakers may also be different. I asked some of the children why they chose the foreign speaker, and they answered, "Because s/he spoke English! S/he is smart." The puppet spoke in Spanish, so they were wrong on that point, but the important thing is that they thought the foreign language speaker was more intelligent than the other puppet, which spoke in Japanese. Therefore, the foreign speaker's mistake was cancelled out for its prestige while the Japanese speaker was trusted less for not knowing the label which children assumed that he/she should know because he/she is a native Japanese speaker.

The second possible reason is that Japanese children of this age are still so culturally nave that they are just simply not aware of the possible attributions of being a foreign language speaker. Although I did not question them directly about their cultural awareness in this study but it is also quite possible that some children of this age have not constructed a contrast between their own and other cultures. They were seemed to be very aware that the foreign puppet spoke something that they did not understand. In fact some children said "I don't

understand what it's saying. It's talking strange", while watching the video clip. Also, some may have found the puppet funny as they smiled watching the clip. These behaviors may indicate that some children were culturally nave to pick up the signal as deviation from their own culture and they just thought the puppet was acting silly or funny. They may have been attracted to the "funny" quality of the puppet when answering the four questions. On the other hand, the Japanese-speaking puppet was judged harshly as they did not think that it was making a joke but producing a linguistic mistake.

Of course, these interpretations still remains very tentative since the present study was not designed to specifically assess these possibilities. Thus, in future research, children's exposure to foreign-language speakers and the values that they and their parents associate with foreign languages and cultures, as well as their overall linguistic and cultural awareness, may have to be looked at as variables. Moreover, the number of trials in future research has to be considered carefully, as the results of the present study depended on single-shot responses from the children.

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