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Female preference for artificial song dialects in the zebra finch (*Taeniopygia* guttata)

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1 Abstract

2 Birdsong is culturally transmitted, and geographical variations of song have been found 3 in several songbird species. There is evidence that such dialects contribute to reproductive 4 isolation through variation in female preference. In the wild, there is no report of consistent 5 dialects in populations of zebra finches. However, under laboratory conditions, we were able 6 to artificially create different colony-wide song dialects. In this species, song plays a crucial 7 role in mate choice and the importance of both subadult and adult song experience in shaping 8 song preferences has been well documented. Therefore, we expected females to prefer songs 9 corresponding to their colony's dialect. We measured this preference using an operant test: 10 females could either trigger a song corresponding to their Colony Song Type (CST) sang by an unfamiliar individual, or another conspecific song, corresponding to a Non-Colony Song Type 11 12 (N-CST). Most females preferred the CST over the N-CST, supporting the idea that zebra finch 13 females exhibit a preference for songs similar to their colony's song. It also reveals that song 14 dialects matter to female zebra finches. It has been proposed that song could be used as an 15 affiliative signal in highly social species. Therefore, preferring the colony dialect could be the 16 consequence of a sexual preference, but also of a social preference. We discuss the potential 17 role of song dialects in the context of social learning.

18 <u>Keywords:</u> female choice, birdsong, operant test, geographical variations, sexual
 19 preference, social preference

20 Introduction

21 Geographical variation in phenotypic traits can have a central role in speciation processes, in particular if such traits play a role in mate choice (Edwards, Kingan, Calkins, 22 23 Balakrishnan, Jennings, Swanson, & Sorenson, 2005; Miller, 1956). Birdsong is an example of 24 such a trait as in many songbird species, geographical song variations have been reported, and 25 mate attraction and stimulation is one of its main functions (Catchpole & Slater, 2008; 26 Kroodsma, 2004; Podos & Warren, 2007). In such species, males of a same geographical 27 location sing the same song type or share a substantial part of their song repertoire whereas 28 males of different locations vary in their songs (Marler & Tamura, 1962; Podos & Warren, 29 2007). Such vocal geographical variations can lead to song dialects and can be maintained over 30 very long periods of time (Derryberry, 2007; García, Arrieta, Kopuchian, & Tubaro, 2015; 31 Harbison, Nelson, & Hahn, 1999; Marler & Tamura, 1962; Trainer, 1983). Several hypotheses 32 about the functions of dialects have been proposed (Catchpole & Slater, 2008). According to the "genetic adaptation hypothesis", geographical variation of birdsong allows individuals to 33 34 recognize and mate with individuals of the same population, promoting the maintenance and 35 development of local adaptations (MacDougall-Shackleton & MacDougall-Shackleton, 2001; 36 Marler & Tamura, 1962, 1964; Nottebohm, 1969, 1972). Geographical variation in song could 37 thus influence female mating preferences (Catchpole & Slater, 2008; Searcy & Yasukawa, 38 1996), with females preferring males singing their natal or local song dialect (King, West, & 39 Eastzer, 1980; MacDougall-Shackleton, MacDougall-Shackleton, & Hahn, 2001; O'Loghlen & 40 Rothstein, 1995; Searcy & Andersson, 1986). According to the "social adaptation hypothesis", 41 song dialects affect social and sexual interactions, but dialectal populations should not be 42 genetically isolated from each other (Payne, 1981). Some studies show indeed a positive correlation between vocal sharing and the maintenance of a territory and/or the reproductive 43 44 success (Beecher, Campbell, & Nordby, 2000; Payne, 1982, 1983). Song dialects may also play an important role in group cohesion as they may signal group identity (Briefer, Aubin,
Lehongre, & Rybak, 2008; Hausberger, Bigot, & Clergeau, 2008). It has been shown that song
could increase social cohesion in highly social species, such as the European starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*; Hausberger et al., 2008).

49 Singing behaviour is often sexually dimorphic, as many sexually selected traits 50 (Catchpole & Slater, 2008, but see Odom, Hall, Riebel, Omland, & Langmore, 2014). This is 51 the case in the zebra finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*), a highly social species in which only males 52 sing. Young zebra finches learn their song by listening, memorising and reproducing the song 53 of conspecifics, mainly adults (Derégnaucourt, 2011 but see Derégnaucourt & Gahr, 2013). 54 Song learning takes place during a sensitive period of the early life, between 25- and 90-days 55 post-hatch (dph), and past these 90 days, vocal changes are rarely observed (Immelmann, 1969). 56 In the zebra finch, song plays a crucial role in mate choice and the link between song and female 57 preference is well studied (for a review, see Riebel, 2009). Under natural conditions, each male 58 zebra finch has a unique song, which constitutes an individual signature (Clayton, 1988; Cynx 59 & Nottebohm, 1992) and is recognized by his sexual partner (Clayton, 1988). Female zebra 60 finches also have a sensitive phase for song preference learning (Riebel, 2003) and the 61 importance of subadult song experience in shaping adult song preferences has been well 62 demonstrated: if deprived of adult song during the sensitive phase of their early life, females 63 fail to discriminate differences in song quality and do not show consistent preferences as adults (Lauay, Gerlach, Adkins-Regan, & DeVoogd, 2004; Riebel, 2000). Females, when adult, do 64 65 prefer the song they heard when they were young over other songs (Clayton, 1988, 1990; Miller, 66 1979a, 1979b; Riebel, 2009). In the wild, female mate choice is based on different signal 67 modalities, but it has been demonstrated that the song could potentially provide sufficient 68 information about a male for females to assess his quality and allow them to make their choice 69 (Holveck & Riebel, 2007). However, within a same population, females can differ in their preferences. For example, differences between direct benefits (such as parental care or access to resources) and indirect benefits (inheritance of genes for viability), can lead to differences in female preference (Candolin, 2003). In addition, female preferences can be influenced by social factors such as male/male and female/female competition (Jennions & Petrie, 1997; Widemo & Saether, 1999). It has also been suggested that zebra finch females might rank male signals differently in preference tests, or that no single trait might signal the absolute quality of a male (Holveck & Riebel, 2007).

77 Until now, studies focusing on zebra finches suggested that dialects could not emerge 78 in this species. Only weak geographical song variations have been found in different Australian 79 populations (Zann, 1993) and it has been concluded that dispersal to and from colonies 80 prevented the formation of colony-specific versions of the song (Zann, 1993). In domesticated 81 populations of zebra finches, a high rate of learning errors probably prevents the establishment 82 of song dialects (Lachlan, van Heijningen, ter Haar, & ten Cate, 2016). However, in our 83 laboratory, we succeeded to create artificial song dialects. We did so by training male founders 84 of three different colonies to produce a very good imitation of a song model (Le Maguer, 85 Geberzahn, Nagle & Derégnaucourt, under review). Male offspring raised in these colonies 86 developed songs with a high conformity to the song model, and each song model led to a 87 different dialect (Derégnaucourt, Nagle, Gahr, Aubin, & Geberzahn, 2014; Le Maguer et al., 88 under review). Female offspring raised in those colonies heard different versions of a unique 89 song type during their early life: the song dialect of their colony. These conditions allowed us 90 to test for a link between song dialects and female preference in a widely studied species. Given 91 that female zebra finches prefer songs they heard when they were young, we predicted that in 92 each colony, females would prefer songs that resemble those produced by males of their colony.

93 To verify this prediction, we tested female zebra finches with an operant conditioning
94 paradigm (Riebel, 2000; Riebel & Slater, 1998; Riebel, Smallegange, Terpstra, & Bolhuis,

95 2002; Salvin, Derégnaucourt, Leboucher, & Amy, 2018). During the test, a female had the 96 choice between two response keys, each triggering a different song type when pecked: one 97 response key triggered the playback of the song type of her colony, which we refer to as the 98 "Colony Song Type" (CST), and the other response key triggered the playback of a conspecific 99 song type that was different from the song type of her colony, which we refer to as the "Non-100 Colony Song Type" (N-CST). According to our hypothesis, we expected that females would 101 peck more often on the response key triggering the CST than on the key triggering the N-CST.

102 Materials and Methods

103 Subjects and rearing conditions

All subjects in this experiment were adult female zebra finches that hatched and were raised in our laboratory. Subjects originated from three different colonies, each of them founded by males previously trained to produce the same song model (Le Maguer et al., under review). Two colonies (colony A1 and colony A2) were founded by males singing song model A (Figure 1a). The third colony (colony B) was founded by males singing a different song model, song model B (Figure 1a).



111 Figure 1. Spectrograms illustrating song models of colonies and of songs used as stimuli for 112 the preference test. (a) Spectrograms of song model A and B that had been used to artificially 113 create song dialects. Song model A and B consisted of a single motif each. (b) Example of one 114 set of song stimuli (set #3) used in the female preference test of the present study. A set was 115 composed of four different song stimuli. Each stimulus consisted of a bout in which the motif 116 was repeated four times. Note that each female subject was exposed to only two out of four 117 song stimuli of a given set: one Non-Colony Song Type (N-CST) and one Colony Song Type 118 (CST), whereby both stimuli were produced by a male unfamiliar to her. Females from different 119 colonies that were tested with the same set of song stimuli were exposed to a different CST 120 stimulus according to their colony. In the first spectrogram (CST for colony A1 females), the 121 different units of a typical zebra finch song are indicated. Introductory syllables (IS) are 122 overlined in white. Syllables are underlined in black. Copies of the song model are overlined in 123 grey. Bird silhouettes to the right of the spectrograms illustrate the females for whom such song 124 stimuli were used: black silhouettes represent song stimuli for a colony A1 female, grey 125 silhouettes represent song stimuli for a colony A2 female and white silhouettes represent song 126 stimuli for a colony B female.

127 The number of colonies and choice of song models are inherent to the protocol of a 128 previous study focusing on cultural evolution of birdsong (Le Maguer et al., under review). 129 Briefly, after creating colony A1, we created a second colony using the same song model (song 130 model A) but a smaller number of founders in order to test whether the number of founder males 131 has an influence on the findings. We created the third colony using founder males singing a 132 different song model in order to test whether results obtained for song model A could be 133 generalised to another song type.

Details of how we set up colonies have been described elsewhere (Le Maguer et al. under review). Briefly, founder males and founder females of each colony were housed together in a communal aviary containing nest boxes and nesting material, so that they could reproduce freely until we obtained at least 34 male pupils per colony. In colony A1, we obtained a total of 48 male and 27 female offspring after 346 days. In colony A2 we obtained 34 male and 26 139 female offspring after 399 days. In colony B we obtained 35 male and 37 female offspring after 140 555 days. Birds were individually marked with three coloured rings one of which was always 141 red and numbered. All birds that hatched in those three colonies (including females used for 142 this study) could interact freely with all the other birds of their colony. The three colonies were 143 kept in three different aviaries (3.18 x 3.32 x 2.84 m), visually and acoustically isolated from 144 each other so that the birds could not hear other songs than those produced by the males of their 145 own colony. All aviaries were set to a 14:10 light:dark (LD) schedule (lights on at 8 am - off at 146 10 pm) and maintained between 20 and 23°C. Birds had ad libitum access to water, seeds mix 147 and egg food for exotic finches, as well as sand and cuttlebones. The basic diet was 148 supplemented once a week with vegetables and fruits, and once a month with hard-boiled eggs.

We tested a total of 63 females: 11 from colony A1, 21 from colony A2 and 31 from colony B. Females from colony A1 were tested at the age of 1601 ± 86 days post-hatch (dph), females of colony A2 at 792 ± 106 dph and females of colony B at 655 ± 89 dph.

152 Apparatus

153 We tested the preference of females for the dialect of their colony by using an operant 154 task with song as a reward (Riebel, 2000; Riebel & Slater, 1998; Riebel et al., 2002; Salvin et 155 al., 2018). The experimental set-up has been inspired by the one described in Houx & ten Cate 156 (1999) and used in other studies (Riebel, 2000; Riebel et al., 2002; Salvin et al., 2018). The 157 apparatus consisted of a sound-proof chamber (85 x 65 x 60 cm) containing a metal cage (46 x 158 22 x 26 cm) with two perches separated by 36 cm. A red response key (1 cm in diameter) was 159 placed above each perch. Behind each key, a mirror of 10 cm diameter was placed to reduce 160 the impact of social isolation. Seeds, egg food, water and sand were available ad libitum 161 throughout the experiment. When pecked, each red key triggered the playback of a song, 162 broadcasted via a loudspeaker (Yamaha MS101 III, Frequency Response: 30 Hz - 20 kHz) 163 located in between the two response keys. Songs were broadcast at a maximum amplitude of 164 70 dB at 30 cm from the speaker (Roline R0-1350 sound-level meter; fast response F and low
165 range LO, A settings). This level is comparable to that produced by a singing male (Houx &
166 ten Cate, 1999). Each sound-proof chamber was equipped with fans providing a low airflow
167 and OSRAM DULUX lights on an automatic 14:10 LD schedule.

168 After manually assigning one specific song to a particular key in SAP 2011 (Sound 169 Analysis Pro software; Tchernichovski, Lints, Derégnaucourt, Cimenser, & Mitra, 2004), this 170 software controlled the playback and automatically switched songs between the two keys each 171 night, to control for possible side preferences. The software kept track of all key pecks (number 172 of pecks and identity of the key pecked) and stored this information in My SQL Workbench 6.3 173 CE tables, from which we could extract excel files. This allowed us to track females' progress 174 day by day. Response keys were connected to the computer using a National Instruments USB-175 6501 port. In order to check whether females intentionally pecked the keys during the test, each 176 sound-proof chamber was equipped with a Logitech C920 webcam. For a representation of the 177 experimental set-up, see Figure 2a.



178

Figure 2. Experimental apparatus and timeline. (a) Experimental set-up for the preference test.
(b) Experimental timeline. Females were housed with members of their colonies until being
transferred to soundproof chambers for the experimental session.

182 Stimuli

It has been demonstrated that female zebra finches are able to generalise their learnt preference for a specific song type (usually the father's song) to the songs of other unfamiliar males (Clayton, 1990; but see Riebel & Smallegange, 2003). Therefore, and in order to prevent an effect of familiarity in our experiment, both song types used as stimuli (CST and N-CST) were produced by unfamiliar birds. In a previous study we had conducted a detailed song analysis that revealed high similarities between males of colony A1 and colony A2 in song features such as syllable and element repertoire, song variability, inter-syllabic gap distribution

190 and song bout structure. At the same time, males from the colonies A1 and A2 differed from 191 those of colony B with respect to these song features (Le Maguer et al., under review). Thus, 192 we had created two different dialects: males from colony A1 and A2 sung one and the same 193 song dialect, males of colony B sung another dialect. The CST for A1 females were songs 194 produced by males of colony A2 and vice versa. Given the large number of males in these 195 colonies, a large pool of songs was available to create the song stimuli. In contrast, no such 196 second colony was available for females of colony B. Therefore, the CST for females of colony 197 B were songs of different males that had been trained to produce an imitation of the song model 198 B but that were not used as founder males for this colony. N-CST for females of the three 199 colonies were sung by males originating from the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in 200 Seewiesen (Germany). Spectrographic illustrations of different stimuli that were used as a N-201 CST are presented in Figure S1.

202

Song recordings

203 We used recordings of undirected songs produced by males when alone in the cage as 204 it is easier to get high-quality recordings of undirected songs than of directed songs. Recordings 205 of directed songs are often polluted by cage noises due to courtship displays of males and calls 206 produced by females. Preference for undirected songs produced by different males have already 207 been shown in female zebra finches (e.g. Holveck & Riebel, 2007; Riebel et al., 2002). 208 Recordings were made in sound-proof chambers with Behringer C-2 microphones and a 209 PreSonus AudioBox (24 bit/96K) recording interface. Before subsequent processing, we 210 applied a high pass filter at 420 Hz and set the peak amplitude to 90% to all the sound files of 211 each male, using Goldwave software (v6.36).

212

Selection of songs based on the song model

213 Zebra finch song is produced in bouts: each song bout usually starts by introductory 214 syllables, followed by one or several renditions of the motif (Figure 1b). Syllables are vocalisations that are separated from each other by silent gaps, and the motif is defined as a short and stereotyped sequence of syllables (Figure 1b). To select song stimuli that best represented the colony's song type, we chose songs from males that produced a very good copy of the song model. To do so, we quantified a similarity score between the copy of the male and the song model of his colony, using the song similarity procedure of SAP 2011 (Tchernichovski et al., 2000; Le Maguer et al., under review). Males whose songs were chosen as CST stimuli had a high similarity to the song model (mean \pm SD = 87 \pm 8).

222

Creation of song stimuli

223 We first selected several song files per male which had a song that could serve as a CST 224 or a N-CST in one of the three colonies. Then, for each male, we selected one natural song bout 225 and digitally modified it using Avisoft SASLab Pro. The aim was to obtain song stimuli that 226 were of similar duration and to mimic the high acoustic stereotypy of natural directed songs 227 (Sossinka & Böhner, 1980). Thus, in the song bout of each male, we kept the three last 228 introductory syllables (preceding the first motif), followed by four renditions of the motif. 229 Depending on the male, we kept either the first song motif that was then copied three times, or 230 the first two song motifs that were then copied once. We kept the natural gap durations between 231 song motifs. To standardize all song stimuli, amplitude was root-mean square equalised with 232 Praat software (peak digitally scaled to 0.99).

To minimise pseudoreplication, we created 10 unique sets of song stimuli, each set being composed of four songs produced by four different males: 1) one male producing a N-CST (conspecific song), 2) one male producing a CST for colony A1 females, 3) one male producing a CST for colony A2 females, 4) one male producing a CST for colony B females (Figure 1b). Note that out of those four stimuli, each female was exposed to only two stimuli during the operant test (one CST and one N-CST). Among the **10** sets, only seven contained a CST for females of colony B, as we did not have more unfamiliar males singing a good copy of the song 240 model B. Therefore, in colony A1 and A2, we assigned one out of 10 sets to each female, 241 whereas in colony B, we assigned one out of seven sets to each female. The same N-CST was 242 broadcasted to females from different colonies who were assigned the same set. However, the 243 CST depended on the colony of the female and was thus different for females from different 244 colonies (Table S1). Within one set, we matched song duration as much as possible (Table S1). 245 The mean duration of songs (\pm SD) was: N-CST songs = 4.09 \pm 1.10 s; CST songs for females 246 of colony A1 = 3.75 ± 0.99 s; CST songs for females of colony A2 = 3.73 ± 1.14 s; CST songs 247 for females of colony $B = 3.37 \pm 0.47$ s. Within each colony, several females were tested with 248 the same set (Table S2).

249 Preference test

250 Each female subject was taken from her colony and transferred to the apparatus at 251 around 5 pm (day 0 of the experiment). From this moment on, the female had access to two 252 response keys and could hear the two different song types (N-CST and CST) sung by two 253 unfamiliar males, each one being triggered by one of the response keys. The females had 254 permanent access to the keys, but pecking the keys elicited songs only during the day: from 8 255 am when the lights switched on, to 10 pm when the lights switched off. As females had to learn 256 how to peck the keys, the first experimental session started with a trial period of two days (day 257 1 and day 2 of the experiment). A female could learn to peck the keys by autoshaping after she 258 accidentally pecked a key. We considered that a female had learned the task if we detected at 259 least 10 pecks on each key in one day (first learning criterion). The day on which this success 260 criterion was reached was considered day 1 of the preference test. Following day 1 of the 261 preference test, females had access to the keys during the three following days (day 2, 3 and 4 262 of the preference test), before transferring her back to her colony. Thus, the preference test 263 lasted four full days and assignment of stimuli to response keys was reversed each night, in 264 order to control for side preferences: on two days the CST was triggered by the right key, and

on two days the CST was triggered by the left key. Females that had not started to regularly
peck the keys at the end of the trial period (morning of day 3 of the experiment) underwent a
training procedure.

268 The training period lasted a maximum of five days (from day 3 to day 7 of the 269 experimental session) and consisted of two daily reinforcement sessions. Reinforcement was 270 provided by 1) drawing the attention of the female to the keys by manually pushing each key 271 several times when she was watching, and 2) sticking seeds or nesting material to the response 272 keys to enhance the appeal of the keys. We kept track of the pecks realised by females after 273 each reinforcement session. If a female still had not started to regularly peck the keys at the end 274 of the five-days training period (day 7 of the experiment), she was transferred back to her colony 275 where she rested for at least a week before a second identical experimental session started. 276 Some females exhibited a side preference that could not be overturned by temporarily hiding 277 the preferred key (i.e. the key on which they pecked more often) and reinforcing the non-278 preferred key during the training period. We assumed that with the preferred key covered, 279 females would start to peck the non-preferred key and would continue to do so even after 280 uncovering the previously preferred key. However, this was not the case. In Figure S2, we 281 present a comparison of song preferences to side preferences at the colony level. For females 282 exhibiting a side preference, we considered that they learned how to peck a key if they pecked 283 the preferred key at least 20 times a day (second learning criterion). If a female failed to reach 284 one of the two learning criteria during the second experimental session, she underwent a third 285 experimental session after having spent at least a week in her colony.

If during one of the training sessions, the female started to regularly peck on both, or on one particular key, training was stopped. The day that the female reached one of the two learning criteria without any reinforcement was considered day 1 of her preference test. From day 1 on, the test continued until day 4. Some females did not learn to press the keys during the first three experimental sessions. Those females were transferred to the apparatus for a fourth experimental session, this time without any training. If a female still had not reached one of the two learning criteria at the end of this fourth experimental session, we considered that she failed the experiment. The procedure of the whole experiment is presented in Figure 2b. At any moment of the experiment, we could check whether a female pecked the keys on purpose using webcams that were running continuously during the day.

296 Notes on animal studies

All procedures reported here followed the European regulations on animal experimentation and were approved by the French Ministry for National Education, Higher Education and Research (authorization no. 02609.02).

300 The following statements on sampling biases are made with reference to the STRANGE 301 framework (Webster & Rutz, 2020). Social background: all females were raised in free range 302 aviaries in which they could interact freely with all members of their colony (males and 303 females) throughout their lives; Trappability and self-selection: all the females within the three 304 colonies were tested, removing any possible bias due to trappability and self-selection; Rearing 305 history: all tested females came from colonies that were created and reared in the same way, 306 with access to the same resources and enrichment (see "Subjects and rearing conditions" section 307 above); Acclimatation and habituation: details concerning acclimatation and habituation to the 308 experimental set-up have been described above in the "Preference test" section; Natural changes 309 in responsiveness: potential changes in females' responsiveness in our experiment could be 310 related to differences in their reproductive state. As zebra finches are considered opportunistic 311 breeders and lack seasonality in breeding (Immelmann, 1968; Zann, 1996), we could not assess 312 females' sexual receptivity before testing; Genetic make-up: all birds came from the same 313 genetic background, as mentioned in the "Subject and rearing conditions" section; Experience: 314 all females of this study had already been captured, handled and tested in sound-proof chambers in other experiments previous to this study. As mentioned in the "Preference test" section, a training procedure has been done to adjust the experimental protocol to suit non- or slowlyengaging individuals. According to our above statements, we estimate the STRANGEness of our sample as low. All potential biases related to STRANGE framework that could be due to females' experiences are discussed in the "Discussion" section.

320 Analysis

Females used several techniques to press the keys, such as pecking it with the beak, pushing it with the feet or the wing, jumping on it or pushing the key by quickly turning around when being close to it. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to all these techniques as "pecking" throughout the article. Due to webcam issues, for three females (one in colony A1 and two in colony B), we had no video confirmation of their pecking success. However, those females had pecked both keys a significant number of times, which led us to believe that those pecks were intentional.

To analyse the females' preferences, we calculated their preference ratio for the CST: total number of pecks for the CST during the four days of test, divided by the grand total of pecks over the four days period. We also calculated preference strength as the number of pecks for the preferred song type, divided by the number of pecks for the less preferred song type.

332 Statistical analysis

To assess the individual preference of all females (N = 37) for the CST or the N-CST, we performed one binomial test per female (function *binom.test* in R), in order to test whether the preference ratio for the CST significantly differed from 0.5 (chance level). We controlled for multiple testing by correcting all 37 individual *p*-values with the *p.adjust* function in R, using the false discovery rate correction (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995). To investigate whether there was a significant preference for the CST at the colony level in each colony, we checked

whether the mean preference ratio was greater than chance by comparing it to 0.5 using a onesample t-test. We corrected p-values for multiplicity using the false discovery rate correction.
To check whether a link existed between motivation and preference strength, we used
Spearman's correlations because data were not normally distributed.

343 Finally, we tested whether the behavioural responses during the preference test differed 344 between the three colonies to check whether there was a higher preference ratio for the CST or 345 a higher number of pecks during the test in one of the three colonies. We ran two separate 346 generalized mixed models (GLMMs), one for each of the response variables. The first model 347 tested whether the preference ratio for the CST differed according to the colony and the second 348 model tested whether the total number of pecks differed between colonies. Both models 349 included the number of experimental sessions that the female needed to reach either of the two learning criteria (i.e. whether she was successful in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th experimental session) 350 351 as a fixed effect. This variable is later referred to as "sessions to success". Both models included 352 the number (ID) of the set of song stimuli the female was tested with, as a random effect. Due 353 to high collinearity between the variables "female age" and "colony" we could not include 354 female age in the model. Thus, we kept only the variables "colony" and "sessions to success" (there was no collinearity between these two variables). We used error distributions from the 355 356 quasi family as we detected overdispersion in both models. To test the preference ratio for the 357 CST, we used a GLMM with a quasibinomial distribution and a logit link function. For each 358 female (N = 37), the response variable was weighted by the total number of pecks she made 359 during the four days of test (using the weights parameter). For the total number of pecks, we 360 used a GLMM with a quasipoisson distribution and a log link function. Both models were 361 performed using the glmmPQL function from the MASS package in R. The levels of each 362 explanatory factor (i.e. "colony" and "sessions to success ") were compared to each other by 363 computing post-hoc Tukey tests with the emmeans package in R (Lenth, 2018).

364 **Results**

365 41 out of 63 tested females reached one of the two learning criteria. Four females pecked 366 the keys less than 20 times on the second day of test. Those four females were thus excluded 367 from the analysis. Therefore, the results for 37 females were used for further analysis (colony 368 A1: n = 10; colony A2: n = 11; colony B: n = 16). 15 out of these 37 females passed the 369 preference test during the first experimental session (colony A1: n = 3; colony A2: n = 5; colony 370 B: n = 7), three during the second experimental session (colony A2: n = 1; colony B: n = 2), 371 four during the third experimental session (colony A1: n = 3; colony B: n = 1), and 15 during 372 the fourth experimental session (colony A1: n = 4; colony A2: n = 5; colony B: n = 6) (Table 373 S3). For the number of successful females tested with each set of song stimuli, see Table S2. 374 Among the 37 females kept for analysis, some did not reach the first learning criterion due to 375 their preference for one particular key over the other -i.e. they pecked the non-preferred key 376 less often than 10 times a day (mean number of pecks per day \pm SD = 1 \pm 2). However, they 377 did reach the second learning criterion. This side preference concerned 17 females: six in colony 378 A1, three in colony A2 and eight in colony B. In the preference analysis of these females, we 379 only focused on pecks on the preferred key and tested whether they pecked more often on the 380 preferred key when it was triggering the CST or when it was triggering the N-CST.

After calculation of each female's preference ratio (number of pecks for the CST/total number of pecks), we witnessed that 26 out of the 37 females significantly preferred one of the two song types, i.e. their preference ratio was significantly different from 0.5 (Figure 3). This means they expressed a significant preference for one of the two song types that could be either the CST or the N-CST (colony A1: 7 out of 10, colony A2: 7 out of 11, colony B: 12 out of 16; Figure 3, Table 1 & Table S3). Additionally, among those 26 females out of 37 that showed a preference, 19 preferred the CST over the N-CST (six in colony A1 and A2, seven in colony B; 388 Figure 3, Table 1 & Table S3) and only seven preferred the N-CST over the CST (one in colony

A1 and A2, five in colony B; Figure 3, Table 1 & Table S3).





Figure 3. Preference ratios (pecks for the Colony Song Type (CST)/total number of pecks) for
each female of: (a) colony A1, (b) colony A2, and (c) colony B. Preference ratios approaching

- 393 1 indicate a preference for the CST, preference ratios approaching 0 indicate a preference for
- the Non-Colony Song Type (N-CST). Asterisks (*) indicate a significant preference for one of
 the two song types (see Table 1 and Table S3).
- **Table 1.** Number and percentage of tested females in each colony that exhibited no preference,
- 397 or a significant preference for the Colony Song type (CST) or for the Non-Colony Song Type
- 398 (N-CST). In each colony, most females showed a preference for the CST.

				Females with a preference			
Colony	n		Females without a preference	For the CST	For the N-CST	Total	
A1	10	п	3	6	1	7	
		%	30	60	10	70	
A2	11	п	4	6	1	7	
		%	36	55	9	64	
В	16	п	4	7	5	12	
		%	25	44	31	75	

399

However, this preference for the colony song type was not reflected at the colony level. The preference for the CST was only significant in colony A2 (tested as a deviation from a 0.5 preference ratio with one-sample t-test: t = 2.30, df = 10, p = 0.044; Figure 4). However, this significant difference disappeared when correcting for multiple testing ($p_{adjusted} = 0.126$). In colony A1 and B, the mean preference ratio was not significantly different from chance level of 0.5 (colony A1: t = 1.94, df = 9, p = 0.084, $p_{adjusted} = 0.126$; colony B: t = 0.31, df = 15, p = 0.762; Figure 4).







409

Figure 4. Preference ratio for the Colony Song Type (CST) over the Non-Colony Song Type (N-CST) in each colony. Open symbols represent preference ratios of individual females. Filled symbols represent the mean preference ratio (with 95% confidence interval). Preference ratios approaching 1 indicate a preference for the CST, preference ratios approaching 0 indicate a preference for the N-CST. The mean preference ratio was only significantly different from a 0.5 preference ratio (dashed line) in colony A2 (one sample t-test, p = 0.044). This significant difference disappeared when correcting for multiple testing ($p_{adjusted} = 0.126$).

417 The absolute number of key pecks over the four days of test varied highly between418 females (Table S3). In order to investigate a possible link between motivation and preference,

419 we tested whether females that pecked more often also had stronger preferences. However, 420 there was no significant correlation between the total number of key pecks and preference 421 strength in any of the colonies (colony A1: $r_s = 0.139$, p = 0.707; colony A2: $r_s = -0.073$, p =422 0.839; colony B: $r_s = 0.444$, p = 0.087).

423 We then further investigated the differences between colonies in the two main 424 responses: preference ratio and total number of key pecks. We found that the preference ratio 425 for the CST was higher in colony A1 than in colony B (Table 2). No difference in the preference 426 ratio was found between the colonies A1 and A2, as well as between colony A2 and colony B 427 (Table 2). As females differed in the number of experimental sessions needed to successfully 428 learn how to peck the keys (Table S3), we also tested whether this factor ("sessions to success") 429 influenced the two main responses. The number of experimental sessions needed to reach either 430 of the two learning criteria did not have any effect on the preference ratio (all pairwise 431 comparisons ns, see Table 2). Two colonies differed in their activity levels: we found that 432 females of colony A1 pecked significantly more often on the keys during the test than females of colony B (Table 2). However, there was no significant difference in the total number of pecks 433 434 between colony A1 and A2 or between A2 and B (Table 2). There was no effect of the number of experimental sessions needed to succeed on the total number of pecks (all pairwise 435 436 comparisons ns, see Table 2).

437 Table 2. Tukey post-hoc pairwise comparisons for GLMMs on the preference ratio for the 438 Colony Song Type (CST) and on the total number of key pecks during the four days of 439 preference test. Colony and number of experimental sessions needed to reach either of the two 440 learning criteria ("sessions to success") are fixed factors. Significant differences are in bold. df 441 = 22.

		Preference ratio			Total number of key pecks				
Source of variation	Pairwise comparison	Estimate	SE	t	р	Estimate	SE	t	р
Colony	A1 - A2	0.462	0.301	1.534	0.295	1.032	0.518	1.993	0.138
	A1 - B	0.657	0.239	2.753	0.03	1.423	0.528	2.693	0.034
	A2 - B	0.195	0.195	0.64	0.799	0.391	0.54	0.725	0.752
Sessions	1 - 2	-0.0387	0.345	-0.112	0.999	-1.412	0.636	-2.221	0.149
to success	1 - 3	-0.4767	0.416	-1.145	0.666	0.575	0.781	0.737	0.881
	1 - 4	0.0229	0.232	0.099	0.99	-0.244	0.462	-0.527	0.951
	2 - 3	-0.4381	0.506	-0.865	0.822	1.987	0.921	2.157	0.167
	2 - 4	0.0616	0.349	0.176	0.998	1.168	0.662	1.879	0.265
	3 - 4	0.4996	0.403	1.239	0.61	-0.819	0.747	-1.097	0.695

442

443 **Discussion**

444 In this study, many female zebra finches (19 out of 37) exhibited a clear preference for 445 the Colony Song Type (CST) over the Non-Colony Song Type (N-CST) whereas few females (seven out of 37) exhibited a preference for the N-CST. Yet, this preference for songs that 446 447 resembled those produced by males of their colony was not reflected at the colony level. 448 Additionally, these individual preferences were not related to the level of motivation of the 449 females. The preference for the CST as well as the activity levels of females appeared to be 450 stronger in colony A1 than in the colony B, but both were not affected by the number of 451 experimental sessions females needed to reach either of the two learning criteria (10 pecks on 452 each key, or 20 pecks on one of the two keys on a same day).

453 Our results are consistent with several previous studies which showed that females of 454 this species prefer the song they experienced during their early life (for a review, see Riebel, 455 2009). However, the current study differs from those earlier studies that usually gave females 456 a choice between the song of an unfamiliar male and a familiar one, such as the father's song, 457 the tutor's song or a song heard from playback during the sensitive phase of song preference 458 learning (Clayton, 1988; Miller, 1979a; Riebel, 2000; Riebel et al., 2002). The fact that many 459 females still preferred the CST over the N-CST even if it was sung by an unfamiliar individual, 460 suggests that this learned preference was strong enough to be generalised to an unfamiliar 461 songster. This confirms the females' ability to generalise the learnt song preference to songs of 462 unfamiliar males, an ability already demonstrated for zebra finches (Clayton, 1990; Riebel, 463 2009).

464 Even if some weak geographical variations in the song had been described in Australian 465 populations of zebra finches (Zann, 1993), the salience of theses variations to females have not 466 been studied so far. Based on artificially created dialects of laboratory colonies, we were able 467 to show here that these acoustic variations matter to female zebra finches. The significance of 468 local song dialects to females for mate choice decisions has been investigated in other species 469 exhibiting geographical song variations naturally. For example, female Nuttall's white-crowned 470 sparrows (Zonotrichia leucophrys nuttalli) were more stimulated by male song of their natal 471 dialect than by male song of adjacent dialects (Baker, 1983). According to the "genetic 472 adaptation hypothesis" we propose that song dialects might matter to female zebra finches in 473 the context of mate choice, as a cue for assortative mating (Tomback & Baker, 1984). In other 474 words, pairing with a male singing the local song type would ensure the female that her 475 offspring will be genetically adapted to the local environment and will have a better survival 476 and reproductive success than foreign birds (Marler & Tamura, 1962, 1964; Nottebohm, 1969, 477 1972; Payne, 1981). Furthermore, it has been argued that female preferences play an important

478 role in the stability of song dialects (reviews in Baker & Cunningham, 1985; Payne, 1981; 479 Rothstein & Fleischer, 1987). In the brown-headed cowbird (Molothrus ater) females show 480 sexual preferences for the correct local whistle type, which could create a selection pressure on 481 males to conform to the local song type and could influence the stability of dialects (O'Loghlen 482 & Rothstein, 1995, 2003). The brown-headed cowbird is an interesting case as it is a brood 483 parasitic species in which young birds are not exposed to conspecific song during their early 484 life. Several studies in the zebra finch proposed that male song learning may likewise be 485 influenced by females. For instance, young males imitate a tutor song better when housed with 486 a hearing female than when housed without a female (Adret, 2004) and worse when housed 487 with a deaf female than when housed with a hearing female (Williams, 2004). More recently, 488 another study suggested that the process of song learning in young males could be guided by 489 the social feedback of an adult female zebra finch (Carouso-Peck & Goldstein, 2019). Given 490 that in the current study females mostly preferred songs of their home dialect, female 491 preferences might have played a role in the establishment and stability of artificial song dialects 492 in our colonies of zebra finches. That is, females' preferences for the CST might have guided 493 young males to conform to this song model.

494 In most female preference studies on zebra finches, female subjects were sexually naive 495 and housed in single-sex groups with no contact of any sort with males prior to the preference 496 test (e.g. Holveck & Riebel, 2007; Riebel, 2000; Riebel et al., 2002). In contrast, females in the 497 current study spent their whole lives with males with whom they could interact freely and 498 reproduce during the course of the communal breeding. Their exhibited preferences might 499 therefore have been weaker than if they had been housed separately from males. Mated female 500 zebra finches express a significant preference for their mate's song over an unfamiliar one 501 (Miller, 1979b). Females who did not show a clear preference for the CST in the current study 502 might have been paired to males producing a poor version of this song type. In fact, even if 503 most males conformed to the colony's song type, some males produced songs that deviated from 504 it (Derégnaucourt et al., 2014; Le Maguer et al., under review). It is possible that some of our 505 females were paired to males producing such deviant versions of the colony song type, a 506 possibility that we were not able to verify as we did no keep track of their pair bonds.

507 Despite the individual preferences of females for the CST, this preference was not 508 reflected at the colony level. Moreover, some females exhibited significant preferences for the 509 N-CST. In other species such as canaries (Serinus canaria), females exhibit clear preferences 510 for particular song syllables (Vallet & Kreutzer, 1995). However, there is no convincing 511 evidence so far that female zebra finches exhibit preferences for particular song features. It 512 rather seems that experience-dependent song preferences of a female zebra finch might 513 interplay with song features of the male's song (such as syllable diversity and spectro-temporal 514 details) to determine which song that female finds attractive (Riebel, 2009). Nevertheless, we 515 cannot exclude that some females in the current study preferred certain N-CST stimuli because 516 of particular sound characteristics.

517 One could have expected an effect of the number of experimental sessions needed to 518 reach either of the two learning criteria on the preference strength for the CST and the activity 519 level of females. This was not the case, suggesting that the rapidity with which a female learned 520 the operant task was not related to her preference strength or her motivation to peck the keys. 521 However, we did find some differences between the colonies in the preference ratio for the CST 522 and in the activity levels of females during the test. Females of colony A1 exhibited a higher 523 preference ratio for the CST and a higher number of pecks than females of colony B. This is 524 probably not due to the nature of the song dialect (A or B), as females of colony A2 and B did 525 not differ in those variables. It has been reported that experiences of females during adulthood 526 could influence their song preferences (e.g. in canaries, Béguin, Leboucher, & Kreutzer, 1998; 527 Nagle & Kreutzer, 1997). In zebra finches, females can develop preferences as adults (Clayton, 528 1988; Miller, 1979b; Riebel, 2009). Thus, we could assume that our females' adult experiences 529 with song affected their preference strength. Given that our females were housed with males 530 during their whole lives, we propose that the experience with the song type of males and the 531 ability for females to interact with them reinforced the previously learned preference. When 532 tested, females of colony A1 were much older than females of colony B. Therefore, they had 533 more experience with the CST, which could have resulted in a stronger preference for the CST 534 and a higher motivation to hear it.

535 In zebra finches, the lack of seasonality in breeding (Immelmann, 1968; Zann, 1996) 536 raises some issues concerning the nature of the observed preferences in females. In our study 537 we did not test for female sexual receptivity. Therefore, we wonder whether females that 538 showed a preference for the CST expressed a sexual preference related to mate choice, or a 539 social preference. In social species, shared song types favour group cohesion (Hausberger et 540 al., 2008). Accordingly, song could be interpreted as an affiliative signal rather than a mere 541 sexual signal in such species. Such social preferences could have played a role in our study as 542 well. To assess this possibility, a social learning task could be used in the future. In zebra 543 finches, the classical observer-demonstrator paradigm has been proven effective to assess social 544 learning in a context of food choice (Benskin, Mann, Lachlan, & Slater, 2002; Guillette & 545 Healy, 2014; Katz & Lachlan, 2003; Riebel, Spierings, Holveck, & Verhulst, 2012). Therefore, 546 if song dialects do constitute a social marker, an observer might preferentially learn his food 547 choice from a bird singing the CST than from a bird singing the N-CST. Female as well as male 548 zebra finches could be tested as observers to determine whether song dialects could constitute 549 an affiliative signal in this species.

550 In conclusion, our work expands on numerous studies showing that zebra finch females 551 express a preference for the song they heard early in life but is the first to demonstrate a direct 552 link between song dialects and female preference in this species. Our findings also underline the difficulty of concluding on whether expressed female preferences in zebra finches are more related to a social or to a sexual preference, but they pave the way to investigate whether song dialects can be used as an affiliative signal in the context of social learning in this model species.

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754 Supplementary Material



756 Figure S1. Spectrograms of songs used as a Non-Colony Song Type (N-CST) stimulus.

757 There was a different N-CST stimulus in each set of song stimuli (a set was composed of one

758 N-CST stimulus and three Colony Song Type (CST) stimuli; one for females of each colony).

759 The 10 N-CST stimuli were recorded from 10 different adult males originating from the Max

- 760 Planck Institute for Ornithology in Seewiesen (Germany).
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769 Comparison of song preference vs. side preference

770 We compared song preferences to side preferences by calculating two additional preference 771 ratios: 1) the preference ratio for the preferred key (either right or left): total number of pecks 772 on the key on which a female pecked more often during the four days of test, divided by the 773 grand total of pecks during the four days period; 2) the preference ratio for the preferred song 774 type (independent of whether it was the CST or the N-CST): total number of pecks for the song 775 type for which a female pecked more often during the four days of test, divided by the grand 776 total of pecks during the four days period. To investigate whether there was a significant side 777 preference and song preference at the colony level in each colony, we checked whether the 778 mean preference ratios were greater than chance level by comparing it to 0.5 using one-sample 779 t-tests. We corrected p-values for multiplicity using the false discovery rate correction. Even 780 though the effect of song preference appears weaker than the effect of side preference (i.e. mean 781 preference ratios are closer to the dashed line in panel (b) than in panel (a) of Figure S2), females 782 still show a highly significant preference for one of the two song types.



783 Figure S2. Comparison of side preferences and song preferences in each colony. Open 784 symbols represent individual females' preference ratios. Filled symbols represent the mean preference ratio (with 95% confidence interval). (a) Preference ratio for the preferred key over 785 786 the non-preferred key. The mean preference ratio was significantly different from a 0.5 787 preference ratio (dashed line) in all colonies (colony A1: t = 6.06, df = 9, p < 0.001, $p_{adjusted} < 10^{-10}$ 788 0.001; colony A2: t = 5.2, df = 10, p < 0.001, $p_{adjusted}$ < 0.001; colony B: t = 10.6, df = 15, p < 789 0.001, $p_{adjusted} < 0.001$). (b) Preference ratio for the preferred song type over the non-preferred 790 song type. The mean preference ratio was significantly different from a 0.5 preference ratio (dashed line) in all colonies (colony A1: t = 4.16, df = 9, p = 0.0024, $p_{adjusted} = 0.0024$; colony 791 792 A2: t = 6.09, df = 10, p < 0.001, *p*_{adjusted} < 0.001; colony B: t = 6.99, df = 15, p < 0.001, *p*_{adjusted} 793 < 0.001).

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		Song du	ration (s)	
Sat	At N COT	CST for colony	CST for colony	CST for colony B
Sel	N-CSI	A1 females	A2 females	females
1	2.79	2.62	3.12	2.49

2.98

2.71

3.52

3.46 3.12

2.82

2.72

3.41

3.37

2.88

794 Table S1. Duration (s) and singer ID of each song composing the 10 sets of song stimuli.

7	4.27	3.95	4.08	4.03
8	4.45	4.34	3.94	-
9	5.36	5.22	4.39	-
10	6.39	5.97	6.12	-
		Sing	er ID	
Set	N CST	CST for colony	CST for colony	CST for colony B
Set	N-CSI	A1 females	A2 females	females
1	1	1508	1741	1631
2	290	1559	1670	1643
3	1103	1505	1668	1593
4	13	1506	1737	1720
5	466	1497	1654	1722
6	325	1499	1705	1680
7	406	1569	1728	1615
8	559	1547	1739	-
9	1075	1567	1694	-
10	63	1553	1709	-

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	Numbe	er of tested fer	males	Number of successful females			
Set	Colony A1	Colony A2	Colony B	Colony A1	Colony A2	Colony B	
1	2	2	4	2	1	1	
2	1	2	4	1	1	3	
3	1	2	5	1	2	3	
4	1	2	5	1	1	3	
5	1	3	5	1	2	3	
6	1	3	4	1	0	1	
7	1	2	4	1	1	2	
8	1	2	-	1	1	-	
9	1	1	-	0	1	-	
10	1	2	-	1	1	-	
Total	n = 11	n = 21	n = 31	n = 10	n = 11	n = 16	

797 Table S2. Number of tested and successful females for each set of song stimuli.

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799 *Note:* Tested females: females that entered the testing apparatus. Successful females: females

800 that reached one of the success criteria and completed the entire preference test.

Table S3. Information on the preference test for each tested female of the three colonies.

802	Preference ratios significantly different from 0.5 (chance level) are in bold	•
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Colony	Female ID	Sessions	Number of pecks	Total number of	Preference	<i>p</i> -value of
		to success	for CST	pecks	ratio	binomial test
A1	1504	1	776	874	0.89	< 0.001
	1512	3	195	340	0.57	0.008
	1513	4	56	291	0.19	< 0.001
	1519	1	2055	3012	0.68	< 0.001
	1526	4	2337	3020	0.77	< 0.001
	1549	3	272	328	0.83	< 0.001
	1552	4	206	375	0.55	0.063
	1561	3	998	1150	0.87	< 0.001
	1572	1	127	253	0.50	1
	1580	4	976	2041	0.48	0.051
A2	1645	1	62	124	0.50	1
	1646	4	101	166	0.61	0.006
	1676	1	104	161	0.65	< 0.001
	1687	4	108	164	0.66	< 0.001
	1688	4	125	229	0.55	0.186
	1699	1	495	826	0.60	< 0.001
	1706	4	241	425	0.57	0.59
	1714	1	144	377	0.38	< 0.001
	1725	1	186	311	0.60	< 0.001
	1730	2	2030	3566	0.57	< 0.001
	1738	4	108	236	0.46	0.216
В	1752	3	153	358	0.43	0.007
	1778	1	244	438	0.56	0.019
	1788	4	53	80	0.66	0.005
	1798	4	1656	2779	0.60	< 0.001
	1799	1	142	434	0.33	< 0.001
	1803	1	84	241	0.35	< 0.001
	1807	4	133	205	0.65	< 0.001
	1814	1	72	128	0.56	0.185
	1821	1	38	58	0.66	0.025
	1823	4	174	261	0.67	< 0.001
	1829	1	72	264	0.27	< 0.001
	1833	4	147	510	0.29	< 0.001
	1838	2	86	184	0.47	0.417
	1847	4	153	223	0.69	< 0.001
	1851	1	106	218	0.49	0.735
	1857	2	186	355	0.52	0.396