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# French preadolescents' perceptions of stylistic variation. A contrastive sociolinguistic study

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## Temporary version

Running title: Preadolescents' perceptions of stylistic variation

### **French preadolescents' perceptions of stylistic variation: a contrastive sociolinguistic study.**

Laurence Buson

*This paper presents the results of a contrastive study of the way that 196 preadolescents in Grenoble (France) view stylistic variation. Various types of data were collected at school in questionnaires, interviews, role-plays and recordings in everyday ordinary situations. The findings that will be discussed here reveal 1) the complexity of the criteria involved in preadolescents' perception and evaluation of stylistic varieties; 2) the influence of some preadolescents' network characteristics, such as the social diversity<sup>1</sup> of friendship dyads.*

#### **Introduction**

The importance of the stylistic dimension (by which I mean intraspeaker variation) in studies of language variation in French is unanimously accepted in the literature: it is particularly salient in French compared to other factors of variation (Gadet, 1998) and may also be more meaningful in French than in other languages (Armstrong, 2001). If this is indeed the case, why have sociolinguists devoted so little attention to this aspect of variation? Several answers are commonly invoked: 1) "the ideology of the standard" (Milroy & Milroy, 1985); this is particularly pertinent in metropolitan France and may potentially constitute a barrier to a flexible, multifaceted conception of linguistic practices; 2) the methodological difficulties inherent in the

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<sup>1</sup> The term commonly used in French is "mixité sociale".

task of data collection; 3) the fact that situation appears to be a “quicksand concept”, providing very few solid bases for analysis, whereas social or geographical characteristics may be easier to consider objectively.

The present study focuses on conscious stylistic choices and, more specifically, on the meanings preadolescents tend to attribute to them. In fact, stylistic flexibility differs from unconscious, automatic stylistic shifts (observed, for example, in very young children<sup>2</sup>) and presupposes the awareness of the stylistic range available to speakers.

This paper also deals with the way in which stylistic variation is perceived, the categorization criteria and the processes involved in the evaluation of these variants, as highlighted by Schilling-Estes:

Given that salience seems to figure so prominently in stylistic variation, a final area for further investigation is that of listener perception: how do listeners determine when style shifting has occurred, and how do they interpret patterns of stylistic variation / ... / ?  
(Schilling-Estes, 2002: 395)

Tyne (2000: 92) has proposed an initial avenue of investigation which relates to the modes of evaluation: two perceptual processes may operate together: namely a "top-down" process (which favors global perception) and a "bottom-up" process (in which the listener tends to segment the utterance and isolate the linguistic components and certain stylistic markers). We can also refer to the "erasure" process proposed by Irvine and Gal (2000, taken up by Gadet, 2006) which emphasizes the process by which certain salient traits are selected as priorities by the listener, to the detriment of a whole range of less salient markers. These are erased or neglected and thus enable listeners to elaborate a coherent perception from an utterance which is not actually

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bernicot (1992) who sheds some light on non-verbal adjustments to situations in children as young as two years old.

coherent in itself. The "Markedness model", initially proposed by Myers-Scotton (2006) in order to analyze plurilingual situations, can also contribute to the understanding of stylistic variation. Speakers internalize communication patterns so that they can recognize whether the chosen codes are marked or unmarked, with the former corresponding to unexpected communicative choices and the latter to expected practices which are perceived more neutrally. We can therefore hypothesize that marked choices should be more salient at the perceptual level and should therefore be more likely to be identified by the receiver of the message. As far as the unmarked choices are concerned, they are either noticed or ignored, depending on their significance as stereotypes.

These tensions between the supposed homogeneity of registers implied by the typologies commonly used in grammars, and the unordered heterogeneity of stylistic practices reality<sup>3</sup>, between salience and stereotype, as well as between expected and unexpected practices, lie at the heart of ideas concerning how speakers evaluate stylistic variation. This is why, while examining the linguistic characteristics involved in these evaluations, we also look at the criteria used by young speakers in order to explain their stylistic choices and the way they interpret variation.

After a description of the contextual background to the study, the research hypotheses and methodology will be presented, followed by a discussion of the results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, along with some conclusions.

### **Context of the study, problems addressed and hypotheses**

The aim of this macro- and micro-sociolinguistic perceptual contrastive study of stylistic variation was:

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<sup>3</sup> Or, at least, its patterned heterogeneity (see Labov, 1982; Gadet, 1992; Tagliamonte, 2006).

- to discover whether French preadolescents are able to produce accurate metalinguistic comments relating to stylistic variation,
- to identify the strategies used by speakers.

This social dimension was examined through both macrosociological factors such as social background (referred to as SB below), gender and age, and microsociological factors associated with the speakers' specific social environment with a closer focus on the preadolescents' peer networks, given that early adolescence is also the period in which the influence of parents is replaced by the influence of the peer group (Labov, 1964: 91-93). Very few studies have combined social class factors and network factors as far as children and preadolescents are concerned<sup>4</sup>.

The hypothesis that frequent contacts with a wide range of socially diversified interlocutors may have crucial effects on stylistic skills remains to be explored. Moreover, if the density and multiplexity concepts proposed by Milroy (1987) are identifiable for adults, what are the relevant concepts in the case of preadolescents? If the main factor in the development of stylistic abilities is the early exposure to a wide range of variations in the input, we should consider the size of preadolescents' peer networks in combination with their social diversity. The hypotheses underlying the study can therefore be summarized as follows: 1) preadolescents from the age of 9<sup>5</sup> are able to express a judgment concerning stylistic variation and to explain the criteria which they use; 2) preadolescents' speech may vary both according to macrosociological criteria (SB, age, gender) and microsociological criteria (peer networks).

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<sup>4</sup> See Cheshire (1982) for a study about stylistic variation in the speech of adolescent peer-groups.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Labov (1976: 207), who was interested in full control rather than the ongoing construction of a skill, situates the acquisition of stylistic variation much later at the end of adolescence, whereas other studies show some evidence of stylistic sensitivity at a younger age (see Reid, 1978; Romaine, 1980; Labov, 2001). A complementary study with children from 5 to 8 years-old is in progress.

**Methodology for data collection and analysis: perceptions of stylistic variation collected in individual interviews**

Following an initial study involving 36 subjects (Buson, 2008(a)), a second study was conducted to provide more robust quantitative data. 196 preadolescents aged between 9 and 11 years were interviewed, from 6 schools and 11 classes, in and around the city of Grenoble. The subjects were in the last two years of French primary school, namely 4th (CM1) and 5th (CM2) grade.

*The sample*

The sample consisted of 107 girls and 89 boys from varied SBs, as charted in Table 1:

Table 1 - Social make-up of the sample

	SB-		SB+		
	Underprivileged	Intermediate-	Intermediate+	Privileged	
<b>9 years</b>	8G + 6B (14)	9G + 4B (13)	4G + 6B (10)	11G + 5B (16)	53
<b>10 years</b>	21G + 9B (30)	13G + 8B (21)	9G + 17B (26)	9G + 11B (20)	97
<b>11 years</b>	8G + 6B (14)	6G + 5B (11)	5G + 4B (9)	4G + 8B (12)	46
	58	45	45	48	196

Preadolescents were allocated to one of the four SBs (social background) (Underprivileged, Intermediate-, Intermediate+ or Privileged) on the basis of information provided by the teachers<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Some information sheets are completed by the parents themselves at the beginning of the school year.

and by the preadolescents (during an individual interview, they were asked to state their parents' occupations). A social index based on the social categories used by INSEE<sup>7</sup> was drawn up.

Two variables were used to describe the social composition of peer networks: the social diversity of friendship dyads and the social diversity of the schools. The social diversity of the friendship pairs was defined through the preadolescents' declared friendship choices: each pupil in each dyad was asked to name his or her best friend in the class so that the SBs of each member could be compared. Then, a preadolescent was considered to belong to a socially diversified dyad if there were two levels between the members of the pair (e.g.: underprivileged / privileged or intermediate+ / underprivileged). If this was not the case, then the social diversity was considered to be weak or zero (e.g.: privileged / privileged or intermediate- / underprivileged). 41 preadolescents belong to highly socially diversified dyads and 145 belong to weakly or non diversified dyads. As far as the social profile of the schools was concerned, the school could be considered as "unmixed" if more than 80% of the pupils shared the same SB. In our sample, 26 preadolescents attended a school with no social diversity (with an underprivileged profile).

#### *Protocol used for data collection*

During the 15-minute individual interviews<sup>8</sup>, the preadolescents:

- listened to a recording of three telephone answering machine messages (recorded by the same speaker) which varied in terms of formality,
- were asked to produce a non-guided comment in response to an open question ("what do you think of it?"),
- answered a questionnaire relating to the utterances they had heard<sup>9</sup>,

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<sup>7</sup> INSEE: Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies).

<sup>8</sup> See Buson 2008(b) for further details about the data collection and analysis.

- were asked to provide some personal information about themselves and their social relations<sup>10</sup> (standardized questions about their families, their peer network, their reading habits and so on),
- acted out very short role-plays with three fictitious interlocutors they might be more or less familiar with.

The questionnaire related first to the most formal and then to the least formal utterance and addressed three main points:

- a judgment about the varieties heard (“sometimes I speak like that and sometimes I don't”, “I like / don't like talking like that”, etc.),
- the perception that one may have of the speaker while listening to him / her (the preadolescents had to choose or reject labels before ordering the selected ones<sup>11</sup>),
- finally, an evaluation of the supposed interlocutor in terms of familiarity and status (“you talk like that to someone you know well / you don't know”, “someone important / a friend”).

#### *Protocol used for data analysis*

Two indices were set up, based on the scores assigned to the different response types so as to make it possible to take into account a set of convergent elements:

- an index for references to normative criteria (Rn)
- an index for references to the interaction (Ri)

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<sup>9</sup>The topics, categories and formulations presented in the questionnaire were taken from the preliminary study and correspond to the answers given by the interviewees.

<sup>10</sup>The sociometric methods used in social psychology (Moreno, 1970) have been used here, in a fairly loose and non-exhaustive way.

<sup>11</sup> The labels suggested to the subjects were related to the speaker's social background, his/her politeness or lack of politeness, the communicative intentions, and the attention paid to speech.



These indices combine the responses to the interview, the questionnaire and the role-plays. Rn is high when the interviewees make use of normative criteria in order to interpret the variation they perceive, i.e. when they produce value judgments, refer to politeness, to proper and improper ways of speaking and so forth. Ri is high when preadolescents refer to the characteristics of the interaction in order to interpret the variation they perceive: i.e. when they refer, for example, to the criterion of familiarity with the interlocutor or to the speaker's communicative intentions. The results' section which follows reports the findings concerning, first, the macrosociological variables (gender, age and SB) for each of the two indices and, second, the microsociological variables for the Ri index<sup>12</sup>.

### **Results: what are the preadolescents' perceptions about stylistic variation and how do social factors influence these perceptions?**

#### *Reference to the norm*

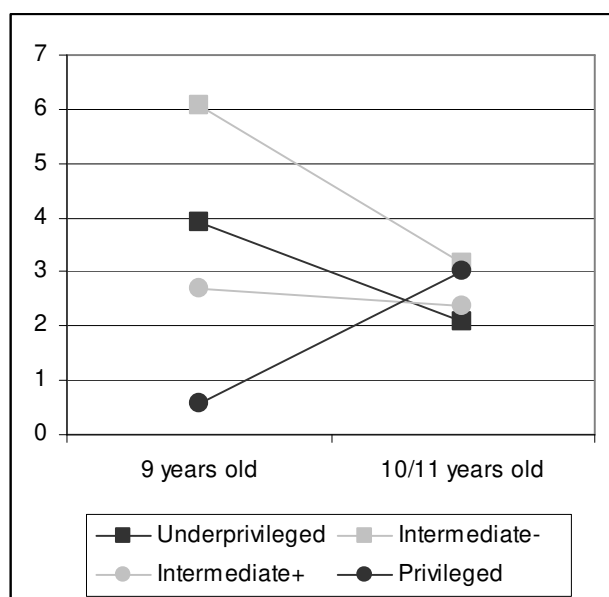
First of all, let us observe the effects of gender, age and SB on Rn. To conduct this analysis, the subjects were subdivided into two SB groups (lower and higher, indicated as SB- and SB+) in order to keep enough subjects in each group. To improve intelligibility, however, the graph indicates the four SBs. As Figure 1 illustrates, two phenomena can be noted: greater normativity in the SB- subjects, on the one hand, and a convergence of responses in preadolescents aged 10 or more on the other. It is notable that the SB- preadolescents, and in particular the “intermediate-” subjects, were particularly normative and more specifically so, under age 10<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> The data showed no significant effect for the Rn index dealing with microsociological factors.

<sup>13</sup> We conducted a three-factor ANOVA (with age, gender and SB). This revealed a significant effect of SB (F1,188=5.88; p=0.01) as well as an interaction between age and SB in a comparison of the 9-year-old and 10-11-year-old groups (F1,188=5.18; p=0.02). There was no significant effect for gender.

Figure 1 - Rn (normative criteria index) and age / social background interaction



This observation is not particularly surprising, given that the same tendency to hypernormativity has been observed in middle-class adults<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, whereas at 9 years of age the differences between SBs are significant<sup>15</sup>, we observe a significant decline in references to the norm in the “intermediate-” subjects<sup>16</sup> which results in a convergence between the SBs. It seems that SB- 9 year-olds are highly normative with respect to non-standard forms but this tends to disappear in adolescence. The 9-year-old preadolescents are still very much influenced by their parents’ speech, and are able to make metalinguistic comments reflecting the normative conventions of adults, but it might be assumed that, as they grow older, they tend to favor peer relations (Bauvois, 1998). Their judgments therefore tend to converge and preadolescents move away from these top-down references. The normative interpretations of variation therefore

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Labov (1976), Bourdieu (1982) or Perrenoud (1988).

<sup>15</sup> According to Fisher's a posteriori LSD test conducted with the four SBs, there were significant differences between "privileged" and "underprivileged" ( $p=0.03$ ) and between "privileged" and "intermediate-" ( $p=0.001$ ) at age 9 years.

<sup>16</sup> Fisher's PLSD,  $p = 0.04$ .

remain present in all preadolescents in a fairly similar way, without playing either a central or discriminatory role.

From a more qualitative point of view, if we analyze the metalinguistic remarks of the interviewees, we observe a high level of sensitivity to social conventions which are sometimes shaped by moral or aesthetic references as shown in the examples translated below:

Elsa (girl, 10, SB+): le premier c'est plus poli parce qu'il parle mieux, la troisième c'est un peu vulgaire (the first one is more polite because he speaks better, the third one is a bit vulgar)

Nicolas (boy, 9, SB-): le premier il est mieux, le deuxième moins bien et puis le troisième pas très bien, j'aime pas trop c'est pas joli comme il parle (the first one is the best, the second isn't as good and the third one, not very good, I don't like it much, it's not pretty the way he talks)

Yet, even if the norm was present in the spontaneous comments made by about 30% of the interviewees, it was rarely the only criterion they used in their evaluations of the utterances. For example, some of the preadolescents interviewed referred to stereotyped speakers who embody specific ways of speaking, as we shall see in the following paragraph.

*Style and social roles: a fixed, stereotypical image of the speaker*

It is noteworthy that some of the preadolescents (23% of them) align stylistic variation, to some extent at least, with social variation. Their speech can then be viewed within the perspective of Romaine's "classic sociolinguistic finding" (1980: 228) which supposes a parallel between the two types of variation: "if a feature is found to be more common in the lower classes than in the upper classes, it will also be more common in the less formal than the most formal styles". Thus,

the formal styles are stereotypically associated with the representatives of authority or with a high social status:

Béline (girl, 10, SB-): le premier il parle comme mon docteur (the first one, he talks like my doctor)

Glagys (girl, 10, SB-): il y en avait qui étaient plutôt, comment dire, qui parlaient comme des riches / ... / les premiers c'est des mots plutôt comme un président des choses comme ça (there were some who were rather, how can I put it, who talked like rich people / ... / the first ones, it's words more like a president, something like that)

Alice (girl, 10, SB+): le premier j'aime pas trop ça fait bourge (I don't like the first one very much, it sounds *rah*<sup>17</sup>)

Furthermore the more informal styles are associated with social stereotypes: youth or even the “*racaille*”<sup>18</sup>:

Muhammet (boy, 10, SB-): le 3ème il parle un peu comment dire un peu comme une racaille (the third one speaks a bit like, how to put it, a bit like one of the rabble)

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<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rah#Derogatory\\_British\\_slang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rah#Derogatory_British_slang)

<sup>18</sup> “*Racaille*” could approximatively be translated by “rabble” (“plebs” or, more recently, “chavs”): a pejorative term recently widely employed in the media due to its inopportune use by a politician.

Mélissa (girl, 10, SB-): il y en avait un c'était un petit peu voyou / ... / le langage c'est le langage des jeunes (there was one who was a bit of a guttersnipe / ... / the language it's youth language)

Laura (girl, 10, SB-): la dernière c'est quelqu'un, comment on pourrait dire, qui traîne souvent dans la rue et voilà il a le langage du quartier (the last one, it's someone, how can I put it, someone who's often hanging around in the streets, there you are it's the language you hear on the street/in the hood)

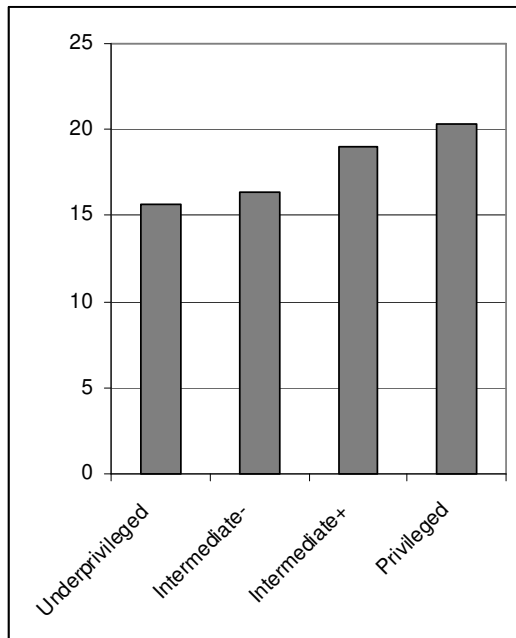
In the same way as for the criterion of the norm, the criterion of the speaker's social role as an emblem of variation supposes that the speaker is constrained by codes beyond his control or by characteristics from which he is unable to distance himself. However, this was not the prevalent conception of stylistic variation revealed by our interviews: in fact, more than 60% referred to the communicative situation and to the characteristics of the interaction in order to explain the variation they heard.

*From style as a situational correlate to style as a symbolic process: the speaker design conception*

*Quantitative analyses: influence of environment and social diversity on perceptions*

The reference to interaction index (Ri) used in this analysis accounts for responses which situate style within a communicative dynamic in contrast to the more fixed conceptions described above (associated with the norm or the speaker's social characteristics).

Figure 2 - Ri (interactional criteria index) and social background



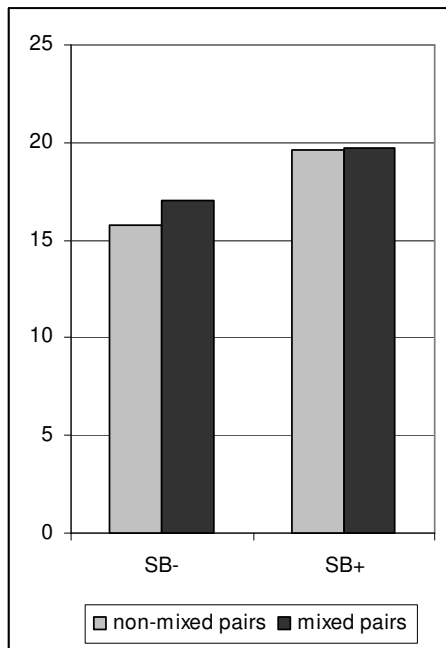
The analysis reveals the significant effect of SB on Ri<sup>19</sup>: as Figure 2 illustrates, the more privileged the SB is, the greater the tendency to refer to interactional factors. By contrast, gender and age do not seem to have any effect on responses. To help fine-tune the interpretations of this result, the social diversity of the friendship dyads was introduced as a co-variant. Results show that, even though a high level of social diversity does not reverse the tendency for SB- scores to be lower than SB+ scores, there is a clear reduction in the difference, due to higher scores in the SB- group (see Figure 3). Thus, the difference between SBs which is significant in the case of “non-mixed” pairs<sup>20</sup>, is not significant in the case of “mixed” pairs<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> This was a three-factor ANOVA (SB, age, gender).  $F(1, 184)=22.29$ ;  $p<0.0001$ . Fisher's a posteriori PLSD test showed that all the differences between SBs were significant except in two cases (between "underprivileged" and "intermediate-" and between "intermediate+" and "privileged").

<sup>20</sup>  $F(1, 143)=17.24$ ;  $p<0.0001$ .

<sup>21</sup>  $F(1, 39)=1.73$ ;  $p=0.19$ .

Figure 3 - Ri (interactional criteria index) and pair social diversity per SB



**Analysis of the open question in the experimental situation: confirmation of the social diversity influence in preadolescents' declared perceptions of variation**

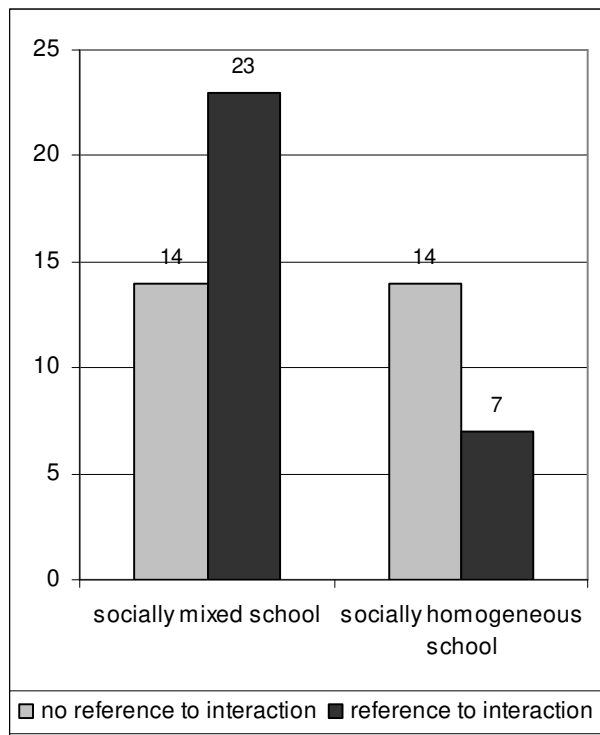
*The social diversity effect on the lower-class preadolescents' perceptions*

The analysis of the open question reveals tendencies similar to those observed in the quantitative analysis, as far as "underprivileged" preadolescents are concerned. As Figure 4 illustrates, preadolescents attending the socially diversified schools spontaneously referred more often to the interaction than those attending schools with no such social diversity<sup>22</sup>.

Figure 4 - Spontaneous reference to the interaction (in the non-leading, open question) in the preadolescents coming from underprivileged environments as a function of the social diversity in their schools

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<sup>22</sup>  $\chi^2=4.458$  at 1ddl;  $p=0.034$ .



These results seem to show that having a wide range of diversified social relations encourages the development of less class-based and more *intraspeaker-oriented* perceptions of how stylistic variants may be used. An interaction-based dynamic is thus promoted, rather than a fixed social image of the speaker. In fact, the speaker can then be perceived as an actor who is able to adapt to the context of the interaction and contribute to the co-construction of this context.

If we now consider the responses given by the preadolescents in greater detail, we can see that they provide a good reflection of two theoretical explanations of style, namely the responsive dimension of style (Bell, 2001) and the speaker design approach defined as follows by Schilling-Estes (2002: 388):



Under speaker design approaches, stylistic variation is viewed not as a reactive phenomenon but as a resource in the active creation, presentation, and re-creation of speaker identity.

*Comments which highlight the process of adapting to the interlocutor and the context of the interaction*

The answers to the open question provide numerous examples in which variation is perceived as a process of adapting to the interlocutor and to the context of interaction.

Eva (girl, 9, SB+): ça dépend à qui tu parles parce que si tu dis 'salut les gars' c'est que tu les connais bien, à des amis, sinon si tu dis 'bonjour je suis momentanément absent' c'est plutôt à des gens que tu connais pas très bien, style des chefs d'entreprise (that depends who you're talking to because if you say 'hi guys' then you know them well, they're your friends, otherwise you say 'hello, I'm not here at the moment' that's more people you don't know very well, like company executives)

Marianne (girl, 9, SB-): d'abord il parle comme si il parlait à quelqu'un de grand, après c'est comme si il parlait à son prof, et après à ses amis (first of all, he speaks as if he was talking to an adult, after that it's like he's talking to his teacher and then to his friends)

Arnaud (boy, 10, SB+): il y a un moment c'est ses copains, il y a un moment c'est quelqu'un, et après... c'est pas la même personne, au début ça pourrait être pour un monsieur important, un monsieur du travail, quelqu'un d'important (there's a time

when it's his friends, there's a time when it's someone else and afterwards... it's not the same person, at the start it could be an important person, someone from work, someone important)

*Comments which highlight the speaker's self-presentation and communicative intentions*

At the same time, other remarks tend to emphasize initiative and the speaker's motivations in terms of “presentation of self” (Coupland, 2001: 197) and communicative intentions.

Thibaut (boy, 10, SB-): des fois on s'amuse à parler comme ça, on parle en gentleman mais c'est pour s'amuser (sometimes it's fun to speak like that, you speak like a gentleman to have a laugh)

Ryad (boy, 11, SB-): il s'est lâché il a changé d'humeur / ... / il a dit d'un air... il fait celui qui est le plus fort et tout (he relaxed, he's changed mood / ... / he said it like... he's like someone who's the best and everything)

Antoine (boy, 11, SB+): la première c'est plus autoritaire, ça fait plus déjà, plus adulte... ou si je suis chez des gens (the first one's more authoritarian, it's more, more adult ... or if I'm at someone's house)

Anne (girl, 9, SB+): le dernier il est plus rigolo il fait peut-être plus rire les gens, c'est peut-être plus agréable d'entendre ça quand on veut laisser un message que d'entendre autre chose, le premier / ... / il est très sérieux (the last one is funnier, maybe it makes people laugh more, maybe it's more fun to hear that when you want to leave a message,

the first / ... / it's very serious)

Quentin (boy, 10, SB-): le premier il est plutôt sérieux / ... / le troisième il se lâche, il se laisse aller, il parle pas comme quelqu'un de sérieux, il parle à quelqu'un qu'il connaît super bien, il a pas peur de rentrer en conflit avec lui (the first one, it's rather serious / ... / , the third, he loosens up, he lets himself go, he doesn't speak like someone serious, he's speaking to someone he knows really well, he's not afraid of having an argument with him)

*Illustration of the complexity of perceptions of stylistic variation perceptions'*

We finish with an illustrative example which reveals the complexity of perceptions about stylistic variation. Indeed, we can identify a whole range of criteria embedded within it:

Linda (girl, 9, SB+): les premiers ils parlaient normalement / ... / on pouvait pas le reconnaître, et que les amis c'est sûr ils peuvent le reconnaître parce qu'il parle d'une manière, quoi ils savent, si il traîne beaucoup avec eux ils savent comment il parle, ses habitudes et tout ça. / ... / les deux premiers extraits c'est plus poli et le troisième c'est moins poli parce que c'est plutôt le langage de dehors. / ... / pour me défendre j'arrive bien mais quand je parle normalement je raccourcis pas les mots. c'est gentil de sa part qu'il dise 'merci beaucoup', il a pas raccourci les mots il a bien tout mis, parce que si par exemple c'est la mairie ou quelqu'un de la poste, il a su bien parler dans le message, parce que sinon ils vont se dire 'regarde comme il parle'. par exemple une personne qui est fragile quoi, qui est sensible, il sait comment lui parler parce que si il parle méchamment, il va lui faire de la peine. le

troisième, si on parle comme ça à un policier, on sait ce qu'on va recevoir. (the first ones, they spoke normally / ... / you couldn't recognize him, and only the friends it's certain they could recognize him because he speaks in a way, well they know, if he hangs around with them a lot then they know how he speaks, his habits and all that / ... / the first two extracts are more polite and the third is less polite because it's more street talk / ... / I can defend myself OK but when I speak normally, I don't shorten the words. it's nice of him to say 'Thank you very much', he didn't shorten the words, he said everything, because if for example it's someone from the town hall or the post office he was able to speak well in the message because otherwise they'd say 'look how he speaks'. for example, someone who's delicate, sensitive, he knows how to talk to him because if he was nasty, he'd hurt their feelings. the third one, if he spoke to a policeman like that, you know what he'd get)

This extract contains:

- normative references: politeness, niceness, “speaking properly”;
- references to a speaker who is emblematic of a variety: “street talk” evokes the language of the underprivileged suburbs;
- references to suiting your talk to the interlocutor: talking to someone from the town hall, the post office, the police;
- and references to the symbolic dimension of style such as presentation of self and style as a communicative strategy: identity through the fact of being recognizable by one's style (“they could recognize him”), the idea of using defensive forms of language (in this case, informal varieties which express a certain strength of character and the ability to stand up for oneself: “defend myself”), concern with the

image that one conveys of oneself through one's way of speaking (“they'd say 'look how he talks', if he spoke to a policeman like that, you know what he'd get”), the fact of taking account of the other person's feelings and the intention of wounding or managing the interlocutor (“hurt someone's feelings” a “sensitive” person).

**Some comments on style in recordings made under natural conditions: highlighting the "eux / nous" (“them / us”) issue**

In order to complete this perceptual study, we will focus on two speech extracts recorded in "natural" situations<sup>23</sup>. The passage below involves Laura (10 years old, 5th grade, underprivileged, “unmixed” school) and her big sister who are talking in the road. Laura is talking about the interviewer who gave her the recording equipment:

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<sup>23</sup> Ten lower-class girls in the initial sample were recorded in “natural” conditions with a recording kit attached to their belts for a period of several hours. They were recorded in ordinary situations, speaking with friends or with adults, in the classroom or the playground. Five of them were attending socially “mixed” schools with preadolescents from all social backgrounds, while five others attended a “unmixed”, underprivileged school. Since the aim of this phase of the study was to analyze preadolescents stylistic practices, our use of this section of the data will be marginal in this article which concentrates on perceptions. We shall, however, make use of certain extracts from the interactions which we consider to be of interest with reference to how preadolescents describe style.

Laura: hein\*< -- bah en fait euh ça sert t(u) as vu euh: e- elle c'est une dame: du langage t(u) as vu< e(lle) surveille comment on: parle - XXX t(u) as vu pa(r)c(e) que même elle\* même elle elle parle comme: je sais pas quoi\* - t(u) as vu euh comme: par exemple: t(u) as vu comme nous des fois on dit on dit des choses euh j(e) sais pas\* on s(e) comprend quand on s(e) parle\*< t(u) as vu\*< - t(out) à l'heure e- elle dit euh on était en train d(e) faire un exercice< et elle dit euh bon bah on va faire style:: la maîtresse:: on va faire::

(in fact uh it's for you know uh she it is a lady for the language you see - she checks up on how we talk - you see - she herself she speaks like I don't know what - you saw how - for example - you see how we sometimes we say things uh I don't know - we understand each other when we talk - you see - earlier she said uh we were doing an exercise - and she said oh well uh we're going to do like "teacher style" we're going to do)

Laura tries to explain to her sister why she has got a microphone. We see that she was surprised at the interviewer's way of speaking who talked like "I don't know what", which implies differently from what one might expect from someone working with children within a school context. The term "style" seems to underpin her observation, which is perfectly understandable given the non-standard use of this term (here it is used in the sense of "in the style of"/ "like"). Thus, Laura noticed a salient feature in the interviewer's speech and used it as a marked element to describe the interviewer's way of speaking. Furthermore, we can note the very clear presence of the "them" versus "us" paradigm in the comment "you see how we sometimes we say things uh I don't know, we understand each other when we talk". It seems that, here, the "we" might refer to the

young people in the estate compared to the school environment which is thought to use more formal varieties. This same opposition between the way of speaking which is thought to characterize school and the peer groups' particular way of speaking is again revealed in the following extract where Abir (10 years old, 5th grade, underprivileged, "unmixed" school) tests the interviewer (labeled Iv) when she puts the microphone on her:

Abir: au début en fait ça fait lache\* ça fait lache et puis après ça fait plus lache  
(to begin with actually it looks daft - it looks daft and then it doesn't look daft any more)

Iv: de quoi< d'avoir le truc< ça s(e) voit pas tro::p (what? having it on ? you can hardly see it)

Abir: ouais -- tu comprends qu'est-c(e) que j(e) dis\*< (yeh - you get what I mean ?)

Mélissa: XX le langage de Abir (XX Abir's language)

Abir intentionally uses a slang expression in a very informal style ("lache") and is surprised that the interviewer has understood her. Mélissa shows her astonishment and notes that this way of speaking is closer to the "we", i.e. the youth, than to the "they", i.e. the adults at school.

## **Conclusion**

The most striking finding which emerges from this study is that the ability to refer to interactional characteristics in interpreting stylistic varieties (such as familiarity with the interlocutor or the communicative intentions of the speaker) is correlated with social status. Indeed, upper-class

preadolescents have higher Ri scores than lower-class preadolescents. In addition to these macro-effects, we observed that lower-class preadolescents are likely to make more spontaneous references to interactional factors if they attend socially diversified schools. Moreover, the gap between social status is not significant when preadolescents belong to highly “mixed” friendship dyads. This seems to show that the social heterogeneity of peer networks tends to compensate for social background.

With regard to the criteria referred to by the preadolescents in order to explain stylistic variation, we can note that these are complex and take many forms: they relate in turn to norms, to the social roles of speakers, to adaptation to the context of the interaction, and to the symbolic dimension of style.

The variety of the repertoires and the scope of the linguistic range available to preadolescents is of considerable social and pedagogical significance. Drawing together insights from analyses of spontaneous interactions on the one hand, and of perceptions on the other will enable us to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of stylistic variation: the way it functions in association with social background and the acquisition / development, and even obsolescence, of wide communicative repertoires.



## Transcription conventions

		<i>Examples</i>
*	exclamatory tone	oui*
<	rising tone	tu es sur <
()	omission of phonemes	j(e) sais pas
XX	inaudible syllables	il est à XX
:	more or less marked extension	Christian::
-	pause, more or less sustained	ça fait honte -- mais
<i>(italics)</i>	transcriber's comments	<i>(to a friend)</i>

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