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Representations of stylistic variation in 9- to 11-year-olds: Cognitive processes and salience¹

Abstract: The emergence of metapragmatic competence in children and the cognitive processes involved in the ability to evaluate style remain under-researched. They are, however, essential to understanding both stylistic usage in context and the developmental dynamic of the acquisition of variation. This article presents a study carried out with 196 children aged 9–11 in the Grenoble area (France), focusing upon representations of stylistic variation. It explores the central question of the association between salience and stereotypes in the construction of judgments on style. Analysis of the children's discourse identifies a number of criteria to which they refer in explaining their impressions of style. A schema-based model is then put forward for the cognitive process at work in stylistic evaluation, combining top-down and bottom-up processes.

Keywords: style, variation, perception, metapragmatic competence, salience, stereotypes

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1 Introduction

For a long time, stylistic variation was the poor relation of variationist sociolinguistics. So much so that in the 1980's Bell (1984) referred to it as a neglected field, a statement echoed more recently by Eckert and Rickford (2001). However, this aspect of variation has recently been the focus of renewed critical attention, as evidenced by the increasing number of publications on the subject (e.g., Coupland 2007; Eckert and Rickford 2001; Snell 2010). While research in the Anglophone sphere is increasing, the French context remains sorely underexplored.

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And yet the specific nature of the social issues at stake requires focused research to be carried out. Stylistic variation is, in point of fact, particularly salient in the French context, due largely to the emphasis placed on “standard” language use (Gadet 2007).

Variationist sociolinguistics has brought to light a number of factors influencing style, mainly attention to speech (Chambers 1996; Labov 1972a, 1972b; Romaine 1980). Meanwhile, interactional sociolinguistics has placed emphasis upon the co-construction of social meaning in interaction, through a comprehensive and intersubjective approach to variation (Coupland 2001, 2007; Eckert 2000, 2001, 2004; Irvine 2001). Coupland (2001) outlines a number of presuppositions that must be deconstructed, including the idea that style is a correlate of the situation rather than an active symbolic process.

While “mechanical” adaptation to the interlocutor is a skill acquired at an early age (De Houwer 1990; Roberts 1994; Smith et al. 2007), conscious communicative strategies are established around the age of 10 years (Buson 2009; Gombert 1990). The pioneering study by Slosberg Anderson (1990) concerning childhood stylistic flexibility has shown that the expression of stylistic variation in children of under 7 remains very limited, even more so in very young children (mainly lexical and prosodic variations, with very few syntactic variations even at 7 years of age).

Further research, particularly concerning the 10–11 year-old age group, which has not been studied much in French, should allow a better understanding of the complexity of stylistic flexibility and the factors that influence its development.

Stylistic flexibility entails a degree of consciousness on the part of the speaker and therefore requires detailed examination of how children form judgments and representations in this area. Such examination needs to focus on both the cognitive processes at work in stylistic evaluation and the issues of social identity underpinning discourses on style. Both listener perception and the social meaning ascribed to stylistic variations can constitute valuable information for the interpretation of linguistic behaviors (Schilling-Estes 2002).

In this paper, we will consider the construction of representations, calling in particular upon the notions of *salience* and *stereotypes*, which are key in both adult and children’s formation of judgments. We will also focus upon the different stages in the acquisition of *metapragmatic competence*, presenting an empirical study of *receptive competence* in preadolescents conducted in Grenoble (France) with 196 children aged 9–11 years (Buson 2009). Our analysis of this study will focus upon three aspects: what forms do these representations take? How are representations about style constructed? On what salient traits do children base their judgments?

2 The construction of representations of style in 9- to 11-year-olds

Awareness of stylistic variation implies a metacognitive dimension. This can be defined as the conscious mastering of the social rules of language, as evidenced by explicit comments made about usage (Bates 1976). It is essential to take this into account when looking at the strategic dimension of productions. *Stylistic flexibility*, taken as the ability to react to – but also act within – the world, presupposes being aware of the different possibilities. Moreover, the self-representations constructed by speakers, both individually and in relation to others in a given situation, will have a strong influence upon linguistic practices.

However, *metapragmatic competence* is problematic to observe. Discourse on variation can show a reflexive attitude concerning stylistic strategies, but can the existence of early *metapragmatic awareness* be proved in children whose cognitive and linguistic development means they are not yet able to talk explicitly about their understanding of the world? As Levelt et al. (1978), Clark (1978) and Slobin (1978) underline, the ability to verbalize things in an explicit fashion is a pivotal variable in the recognition of metalinguistic competence.

Self-correction, other correction and language games reveal metalinguistic awareness in very young children from the age of 2. Similarly, some behavior, like the modulations used in games of “talking like”, is a strong indicator of *metapragmatic awareness* of variation (Clark 1978). However, it remains difficult to fix a limit between what is semi-conscious and fully conscious as this depends upon the ability to verbalize.

It is possible to have access to children’s representations through the way in which they adapt their language in certain exchanges. These modulations show a desire to modify production according to criteria they have recognized and integrated as relevant to variation, such as the age of their interlocutor. Clark (1978) takes up Shatz and Gelman (1973)’s results showing that from the age of 4, children use different expressions to speak to younger children or adults. Auger (1997) also compares how children from 4 to 8 years-old change their discourse in order to address another child. It appears that children of 4 already possess certain forms of discourse aimed at children, even if they often mix simplifications and complex structures (Auger 1997), whereas older children use the appropriate styles satisfactorily. The author concludes that perception is ahead of production. This hypothesis strikes us as acceptable only if posited in terms of adult-centered criteria for production, otherwise production can be considered to precede awareness of the social value of variation.

While metalinguistic awareness occurs before the age of 6, *metapragmatic awareness* therefore seems to be acquired afterwards. According to this view, adjustments of an automatic nature occur long before those of a strategic nature. Gombert (1990) takes up the results of numerous studies analyzing the perception of communicative failure in children of school age. These studies show a more objective perception of the situation in older children (8+) who base their analysis on the language itself. According to this view, before the age of 9–10, children are more influenced by their knowledge of the speaker (a child is less credible than an adult, a supposedly “stupid” adult less credible than a normal adult, etc.) and base their judgments more on these extralinguistic factors than on the message itself. An experiment by Brami-Mouling (1977), focusing on children’s register and carried out with 20 subjects between the ages of 8 and 12, required them to tell a story firstly to children of the same age and then to younger children (5–6 year-olds). The results show that there is indeed a discrepancy between effective *pragmatic competence* and children’s ability to explain their stylistic choices. Among the strategies observed with the youngest interlocutors, Brami-Mouling cites a whole range of prosodic, lexical, syntactic and discursive modifications. However, when asked to explain what they had done to tell the story to a younger child, the subjects only mentioned minor alterations such as speaking more slowly or using easier vocabulary. The author thus concludes that the earliest awareness of such linguistic behavior pertains to prosodic or lexical differences (Brami-Mouling 1977). Children are aware that they should adapt their discourse to the age of their interlocutor but the adjustments remain on a partially conscious, or at least semi-conscious, level.

If certain authors posit that metapragmatic activity exists from the age of 2 or 3, whereas others situate it at 8–10, this is perhaps because of varying definitions of what *metapragmatic competence* actually is. A major difference lies in whether the ability to explain variation is taken into account (this criterion implies later acquisition as it depends on the ability to engage in abstract discussion of linguistic choices). This distinction is echoed in the data-collection methods used, which vary from observing spontaneous conversations to role-playing or later justification of linguistic choices. Enquiry must therefore be clearly situated in terms of both what is being studied and the levels of observation being used in order to avoid confusing the abilities in question.

The early adaption observed in children of preschool age would therefore be examples of what Gombert (1990) calls *epipragmatic* behavior, when knowledge of the subject is evidently implicated in linguistic behavior (for example self-correction). This corresponds to a phase during which the child has a certain degree of cognitive control over their production but cannot yet dissociate language from the situation of production.

However, these phases are not discrete and, as underlined by Kristiansen (2008), awareness can be viewed as a gradual dimension that includes the semi-conscious. *Receptive competence*, combining representations of the self, the other and the social meaning created in an interaction, therefore evolves gradually along a continuum.

With age, and a certain form of environmental pressure, implicit/epilinguistic knowledge gradually moves towards the conscious control of language – this is the stage of metapragmatic behavior. This evolution would therefore essentially be conveyed by the degree to which the addressee is taken into account.

In order to illustrate these different aspects and bring new elements to the question, we shall now turn to the experimental part of our study, beginning with a discussion of our methodological approach.

2.1 Methodological questions

We will now outline a field study conducted with just under 200 French-speaking children aged between 9 and 11 (Buson 2009). This will allow us to further examine the issues of salience and perceptive/evaluative processes. We will also analyze the possible gaps between what is perceived and what is restored, as well as the criteria mentioned by children while evaluating varieties.

2.1.1 Six elementary schools and eleven 4th and 5th grade classes in greater Grenoble (South-East France)

Six schools were contacted comprising a total of eleven 4th and 5th grade classes (CM classes in the French elementary school). The schools in question were of varying social profiles – mixed, advantaged and disadvantaged:

- 1 located in a working class area of Grenoble,
- 1 located in a socially advantaged part of greater Grenoble,
- 3 located in a fairly working-class town 20 km from Grenoble,
- 1 located in a semi-rural environment, in a village 20 km from Grenoble.

2.1.2 The sample

In Table 1 below the 196 participants are distributed according to social background, age and gender. Our sample is composed of 107 girls and 89 boys from different social backgrounds.

Table 1: Structure of the data sample

AGE	Disadvantaged	Intermediate–	Intermediate+	Advantaged ²	total
9	8G + 6B (14)	9G + 4B (13)	4G + 6B (10)	11G + 5B (16)	53
10	21G + 9B (30)	13G + 8B (21)	9G + 17B (26)	9G + 11B (20)	97
11	8G + 6B (14)	6G + 5B (11)	5G + 4B (9)	4G + 8B (12)	46
total	58	45	45	48	196

2.1.3 Collection of spontaneous statements in reaction to an audio document

We conducted 196 individual recorded interviews of approximately 20 minutes each. The interview included the following three phases:

- An exchange concerning an audio document in which the child:
 - listens to a recording of three utterances of varying degrees of formality;
 - is invited to develop a nondirected comment elicited by an open-ended question *What did you notice? What do you think about it?* followed by a single follow-up question;
 - answers a series of questions concerning the utterances heard;
- A discussion designed to obtain personal information about the child (their family situation and peer network);
 - Controlled improvisation around a typical scenario with three interlocutors of varying degrees of familiarity.

This study concentrates on the stage indicated in italics above. It is based upon qualitative analysis of the children's responses. The audio document simulates answering machine messages and comprises three stylistically contrasting messages, written beforehand and acted by an adult speaker:

- (1) Extract 1 (formal): *bonjour – je suis désolé je suis momentanément³ absent – mais si vous le souhaitez vous pouvez m(e) laisseR un message avec vos coordonnées et j(e) vous recontacterai ultérieurement – je vous remercie et à bientôt*

'hello – I'm currently unavailable – but if you wish, you may leave a message with your contact details and I'll return your call shortly – thank you for calling'⁴

² Henceforth disadv. inter–, inter+, adv.

³ The capital letters indicate the presence of liaisons, which are sociolinguistic variables with high social value in French.

⁴ The translations of the extracts and responses attempt to reproduce as far as possible the level of lexical, phonological, syntactic and pragmatic variation in order to render the stylistic stakes

- (2) Extract 2 (intermediate): *bonjour je suis pas là – si vous voulez vous pouvez m(e) laisser un message et j(e) vous rappellerai – merci a bientôt*

‘hello – I’m not here, but if you want you can leave me a message an(d) I’ll call you back. thanks’

- (3) Extract 3 (informal): *salut les gars! bon j(e) suis pas là désolé – mais lâchez-vous laissez-moi un message et j(e) vous rappelle allez à plus ciao*

‘hey guys! sorry, I’m not (h)ere innit, but let rip, leave me a message an(d) I’ll call you back – later, yeah – see ya’

The first extract recorded was devised with a view to showing a higher degree of formality on a phonetic, syntactic, lexical and pragmatic level. This formality gradually decreases with each extract.

This material enabled us to collect children’s comments on stylistic variation, including spontaneous remarks, which we shall now analyze in detail.

2.2 The criteria used to talk about stylistic variation: social roles, the norm and characteristics of the interaction

The spontaneous comments, collected immediately after listening to the audio document, can be broadly grouped into eight categories ranging from no response to a response calling upon multiple criteria to interpret the variations (see Figure 1).

2.2.1 *The first category of spontaneous comments* characterizes 48 children (nearly 25% of the sample) who make no reference to interaction, norms or the social characteristics of the speaker. These children were grouped together in the same category (in white in Figure 1) under the heading *focused on content or no response*. Some do not reply or say they do not know:

- (4) *je sais pas*

‘I don’t know’

(Marion, age 10, inter–)

and the notion of salience clear to the non-francophone reader. Salient features are therefore not always identical but attention is drawn to this where necessary in the analysis provided.

Spontaneous responses (open -ended question)

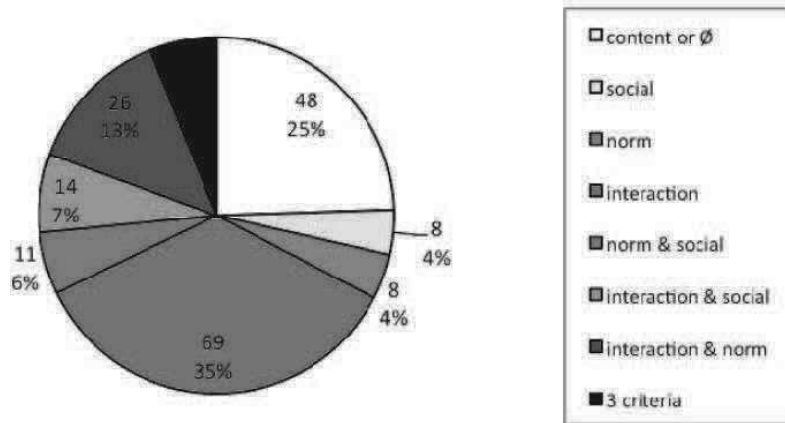


Fig. 1: Types of response received to the open-ended question

Some concentrate solely upon the content of the messages:

- (5) *il y a un monsieur il dit qu'il est absent et après il dit de laisser un message*
 'there's a man he says he's not there and then he says to leave a message'
 (Mickaël, age 9 ans, inter-)

Others seem to perceive the variation but without managing to explain what was said or ascribe any sociolinguistic value to it:

- (6) *en fait c'est une messagerie, ils veulent l'appeler et ils tombent sur son répondeur et il dit laissez-moi un message. il y en a un où il a répondu salut les gars, les autres il était sur la messagerie*

'well it's an answering machine, they want to call him and they get the machine and he says *leave me a message*. there's one where he says *hey guys*, the others he was on the answering machine'
 (Laura, age 9, disadv.)

2.2.2 *The second category of spontaneous comments* characterizes 8 children (4% of the sample) who refer exclusively to the social characteristics of the speaker (in yellow in Figure 1). For example, Nicolas identifies with a style (the least formal) that seems to correspond to his own in general:

- (7) *c'est pas de la même catégorie, c'est pas pareil, la 3 elle est pas pareil que la 1ère. L'accent, enfin pas l'accent, comment il parle. la dernière j'aime bien, c'est plus de mon style, ce que je dis*

'it's not the same category, it's not the same, number 3's not the same as the 1st one, the accent, well, no, not the accent, the way he talks. I like the last one, **it's more my kind of style**, what I say'

(Nicolas, age 10, inter+)

Baptiste ascribes the variation to the speaker's age:

- (8) *le 1er on dirait qu'il est plus vieux et puis le 2ème encore un petit peu plus jeune, et le 3ème aussi, c'est encore plus jeune*

'the 1st one, **it's like he's older** and the 2nd a little bit younger, and the 3rd one as well, it's even younger'

(Baptiste, age 10, inter+)

Thomas ascribes the formal style to a speaker of high social status:

- (9) *le 1er c'est comme si il était docteur*

'the 1st one it's like he's a doctor'

(Thomas, age 9, adv.)

2.2.3 *The third category of spontaneous comments* characterizes 11 children (6% of the sample) who refer to both the norm and the social characteristics of the speaker (in green in Figure 1). Some children allude to speaking like a *racaille*, a *voyou* or the *jeunes du quartier* ('chav', 'yob' or 'kids from the 'block'/'hood'), as well as to *bien parler* or *parler correctement* (speaking 'well' or 'properly') and to politeness:

- (10) *le 3ème il parle un peu comment dire un peu comme une racaille lâchez-vous, ça parle un peu mal. le 1er ça parle bien, la 2ème ça ressemble un peu à la 1ère. le 1er il parle normal, comme d'habitude les gens ils parlent*

'the 3rd one he talks a bit, I don't know, a bit **like a chav** *let rip* he speaks kind of **badly**. the 1st one, he speaks well the 2nd one it's a bit like the 1st one. the 1st one he speaks normal, like people speak usually'

(Muhammet, age 10, disadv.)

- (11) *il y a quelqu'un qui était un jeune, qui parle comme les jeunes du quartier quoi, le 1er c'était un monsieur sérieux, et le 2ème je sais pas c'est un peu comme le 1er, enfin c'est les deux mélangés. le 1er il parle bien français et le jeune il parle pas vraiment correctement*

'there's someone who's a **kid**, who speaks **like the kids from the block/hood**, you know, the 1st one it was a **serious man**, and the 2nd I don't know it's a bit like the 1st, well it's a mix of the two. the 1st one he **speaks good French** and the kid he **doesn't really speak properly**'

(Jéréemie, age 10, inter+)

Some others, like Nassima, refer to the speaker's social background and to his level of education:

- (12) *le dernier il est pas très correct parce qu'il dit allo salut tout ça. ils disent pas la même chose, ils ont pas dit les mêmes mots, parce que il y en a un qui est plus, par exemple qui travaille dans un métier et il parle correctement et tout. si il serait pas pauvre il aurait mieux parlé parce que par exemple lui il serait pas allé loin dans ses études et quelqu'un de riche il serait allé loin*

'the last one he's not very proper because he says *hi, hey*, and all that. they don't say the same thing, they don't say the same words, because there's one who's more, for example who works in a profession and he speaks properly and everything. if he wasn't poor, he would've spoken better because for example **he wouldn't've gone far in school and someone rich he'd've gone far**'

(Nassima, age 9, inter-)

2.2.4 *The fourth category of spontaneous comments* characterizes 8 children (4%) who refer solely to the norm (in blue in Figure 1). For instance, Nicolas judges the informal style from an aesthetic standpoint:

- (13) *le 1er il est mieux, le 2ème moins bien et puis le 3ème pas très bien. j'aime pas trop c'est pas joli comme il parle lâchez-vous et tout ça*

'the 1st one's better, the 2nd not as good, and the last one not very good. I don't like it very much, **it doesn't sound nice** the way he talks *let rip* and all that'

(Nicolas, age 9, inter-)

Some children like Clément refer to politeness and considers certain expressions rude:

- (14) *le 1er il était poli, très poli, le 2ème moins et le dernier pas. parce que il y a des mots qu'ils disent pas tous lâchez-vous, bonjour je ne suis pas là ça c'est une manière de politesse. l'autre je sais pas c'est plus **des gros mots**. doucement et clair, l'autre il parle plus vite*

'the 1st one he was polite, very polite, the 2nd one less and the last one not at all, because there are words that they don't all say *let rip, hello, I am not here* that's a way of being polite. the other one I don't know it's more **rude words**. slow and clear, the other one he speaks faster'

(Clément, age 11, inter+)

2.2.5 *The fifth category of spontaneous comments* characterizes 69 children (more than 33% of the sample) who refer to the characteristics of the interaction (in pink in Figure 1) and this proportion reaches over 60% when taking into account those who combine this with other criteria (in orange, purple and black in Figure 1). For example, Simon takes the interlocutor into account, whilst criticizing certain forms and explaining that, as an adult, a speaker faces certain constraints:

- (15) *quand même salut les gars, si c'était une fille qui l'appelait, ça serait pas très très bien. le 2ème c'était normal. la 3ème c'est plutôt il parle à ses copains, que les autres il parlait à des gens, un peu tout le monde. par exemple les gars c'est pas un mot à dire à des personnes, par exemple tu es un adulte **tu vas pas dire ça à ton voisin**. par exemple quand il dit laissez moi vos coordonnées je pourrai vous rappeler, comme ça au moins il peut leur reparler*

'I mean *hey guys* if it was a girl phoning him, it wouldn't be very very good. the 2nd one it was normal. the 3rd one it was more he's talking to his mates, the other ones he was talking to other people, everyone, like, for example, *guys*, it's not a word you say to people, for example if you're an adult **you're not gonna say that to your neighbor**. for example when he says *leave me your contact details, I can call you back*, that way at least he can talk to them again'

(Simon, age 9, inter+)

Karine judges the appropriateness of the messages and attributes certain ways of speaking to stereotypical speakers. At the same time, she projects herself into the

different styles and takes the communicative situation into account as a variable to support her judgment:

- (16) *la 1ère elle était assez correcte et la dernière elle était plus entre copains, c'est pas comme si on venait juste de rencontrer un ami quoi, c'est moins correct quoi, c'est moins . . . le dernier il a plutôt parlé comme les adolescents et le 1er il a parlé comme si comme si il était bien élevé, enfin il a parlé normalement, pas avec des mots que les jeunes ils prennent. **la dernière je parle plutôt comme ça mais des fois je parle comme la 1ère mais je sais pas la 1ère c'était un peu trop correct, un peu trop poli je sais pas, et la dernière c'était plutôt je parle un peu comme ça quoi, je parle comme ça à mes copains, mes copines. en même temps ça fait un peu trop bande et en même temps j'aime bien parce qu'on est plus habitué à parler comme ça***

'the 1st one was quite proper and the last one was more between friends, it's not like you'd just met a friend, like, it's less proper, like, it's less . . . the last one he spoke more like teenagers do and the 1st one he spoke like, like he was well brought-up, well, he spoke normally, not with words that kids use. **the last one I speak more like that but sometimes I speak like the 1st one but, I don't know, the 1st one it's a bit too proper**, a bit too polite, I don't know, and the last one, it's more, I talk a bit like that, yeah, **I talk like that to my friends**. at the same time it's a bit, you know, gang-y, and at the same time I like it because we're more used to talking like that'
(Karine, age 10, inter-)

Ryad takes into account the communicative aim of the speaker, whilst making a very negative judgment about certain styles both in terms of the norm and of the speakers likely to use such styles:

- (17) *je sais pas ses copains ils l'ont appelé et lui il faisait la voix du répondeur, ça fait un peu rire quoi. au début il faisait vraiment bien la voix, après il a vraiment . . . n'importe quoi il a dit lâchez-vous les gars et tout. au début il voulait faire croire à ses copains qu'il était pas là et après il s'est lâché **il a changé d'humeur**. au début il parle gentil, après il parle normal, et après **il parle vraiment méchant**, il fait une voix vraiment grave, il a dit d'un air . . . il fait celui qui est le plus fort et tout, je sais pas comment dire, on dirait un peu qu'il **fait sa racaille**. au 1er il dit bien, il le fait bien sauf que normalement c'est une femme qui dit*

'I don't know, his friends called him and he was doing the voice on the answering machine, it's kind of funny. at first he did the voice really well, then

he really . . . it was, like, whatever! he said *let rip* and everything. at first he wanted to make his friends think he wasn't there and then he let rip **his mood changed**. at first he was speaking nice and then he was speaking normal and then he was **speaking really nasty**, he did a really deep voice, he said in a kind of . . . he was acting all hard and that, I don't know how to say it, it's a bit like **he was doing a chav**. the 1st one he says it well, he does it well only normally it's a woman who says it'
(Ryad, age 11, inter-)

Chahinaize also takes into account the presumed interlocutor of the message and judges the politeness of certain messages. She tries to situate herself with her friends in relation to certain usages, leading her to distance herself from the formal style:

- (18) *c'était des répondeurs et il y en avait plusieurs, trois, et à chaque fois il disait pas sur le même ton il disait pas aux mêmes personnes. la dernière il disait pour ses copains, et au début il disait pour les gens par exemple si ils appellent par exemple pour un rendez-vous après ils rappellent et il dit mieux que le dernier. au milieu ça ressemblait un peu au 1er. au dernier on dirait il est plus exclamatif et au 1er il est plus poli. avec les copines tout ça on n'a pas le même langage que le 1er, mais le 3ème c'est pas un langage courant, on parle pas exclamatif comme ça tout le temps*

'they were answering machines and there were lots of them, three, and each time he didn't use the same tone he wasn't saying it to the same people. the last one he was saying it to his friends, and at first he was saying it to people for example if they were calling for an appointment then they call back and he says it better than the last one. in the middle it was a bit like the 1st one. the last one it's like he's more exclamatory and in the 1st one he's more polite. **with my friends and that we don't use the same language as the 1st one, but the 3rd one it's not ordinary language, we don't talk exclamatory like that all the time**'
(Chahinaize, age 10, disadv.)

These initial analyses show that more than 60% of the subjects are able to refer spontaneously to the characteristics of the interaction. The results also enable us to identify what criteria children use to interpret perceived variation. The question is then what elements are used by the children to establish these criteria.

2.3 The perceptive process: links between salient features and stereotypical representations

The construction of representations and judgments concerning style belongs to the sphere of *receptive competence*. From a cognitive perspective, this involves

the ability to [...] categorize speech as such and [to] relate lectal categories to social categories. In more precise terms, it involves the step from a linguistic trigger to a social schema, activating stored encyclopaedic knowledge in the broad sense, including ideological aspects and psychological attributes associated with the group in question (Kristiansen 2008: 50).

Receptive competence therefore entails a process establishing links between styles and social meaning. It calls upon the notions of *salience* (a bottom-up process moving from details to a wider picture) and *stereotype* (a top-down process taking the overall image as starting point). As noted by Field (2004), the question is understanding how these two sources of information interact and which is predominant in the case of cognitive conflict. We shall look at how and why these two modalities are essential in the representation of variation, and how they interact when style is perceived and evaluated.

2.3.1 Bottom-up perception and salience

Variables are placed on a scale of salience that is linked to a scale of awareness of their social significance. This raises the question of what makes a feature more or less salient.

Generally speaking, salience refers to what first comes to mind, first catches one's attention; from a linguistic point of view, a salient element stands out to the extent that it takes on specific cognitive importance and can, for example, determine reactions to an utterance (Landragin 2005).

Nevertheless, as noted by Kerswill and Williams (2002), there is a risk of circularity in the definition of salience because if we accept Trudgill (1986)'s postulate that one of the factors of salience is its involvement in the process of linguistic change, how is it possible to determine whether the primary characteristic of the variable is its involvement in this change or its salience?

A number of questions can therefore be raised concerning the emergence of salience, the factors determining the predominance of certain variables over others, and the role of intra- vs. extra-linguistic salience.

In this perspective, a first group of factors can be labeled as intrinsically salient (Landragin 2004) because they correspond to the nature of the element itself. For example, a term made up of a combination of infrequent phonemes can appear salient in an utterance. A second group of factors concerns the linguistic context of the element and the way in which certain features are foregrounded during enunciation via prosody, syntax, semantic aspects, the purpose of the exchange etc. (Landragin 2004). Finally, a third group of factors can be mentioned: those that relate to the linguistic context but also, and perhaps above all, to the extra-linguistic context. For example, on a semantic level a feature can have a strong affective resonance for a particular individual (e.g., snake, vampire, etc.), or can take on particular importance according to the aim of the exchange.

Similarly, Kerswill and William's (2002) model is founded upon the principle of combining internal factors (phonological contrasts, syntactic environments and particular prosodies) and extra-linguistic factors (cognitive, pragmatic, interactional, psycho-social and socio-demographic). According to them, there is no single necessary and sufficient condition that can enable one variable to be deemed salient, even if external factors are, in their view, the key elements.

The description of these factors shows that in most cases salience should be considered in terms of a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Yaeger-Dror 1993), and cannot be predicted because it depends upon the context of the interaction.

Furthermore, salience begs the question of what constitutes a salient unit: is style evaluated on the basis of a single feature or a set of congruent features, and what are these features? Can a phoneme be considered stylistically salient, or is the word the most relevant unit to consider? Bell (2001) therefore advocates analyzing co-occurring features and combining this with quantitative and qualitative analysis so as to foreground significant covariational phenomena and more isolated phenomena that nonetheless have high stylistic relevance.

Gadet (2002) also refers to the notion of *salience* as being carried by isolated features or a combination of variables. She uses a study by Auvigne and Monté (1982) to highlight the central criteria of instability. The *working-class* effect she refers to is not produced by a list of forms or terms that are stigmatizing by their mere presence, but rather by a combination of disparate standard and non-standard features. The audience's evaluation is based upon an overall impression linked to the general homogeneity of the discourse, the frequency of certain linguistic features and the varying degree of stigma attached to the latter.

Nonetheless, this question of the salience of variables appears difficult to dissociate from individuals' initial representations, their rapport to the norm and their level of familiarity with the variants. As Gadet (2010) suggests, the question of *receptive competence* is complex for many reasons: different levels (phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical etc.) call upon different processes; elements can be

situated on a continuum and are not always present/absent; features can be over-determined by the norm and function as symbols, or, conversely, remain indicative and act as indexes.

Saliency cannot, therefore, be dissociated from the individual perceiving a message. Speakers construct judgments on the basis of a combination of *intrinsic salience* (elements that are inherently salient), *produced salience* (elements accentuated by the speaker) and *received salience* (elements that carry personal resonance for the addressee, in a given context, and thus carry a different symbolic weight).

2.3.2 The salience of lexical level

In our data, we can see that 70% of the children quote extracts from the recording in their comments, with varying degrees of accuracy. For example, Eva notes certain lexical elements, in both the formal and informal style, and uses these to explain the variation between the extracts.

- (19) *il dit chaque fois la même chose mais chaque fois différemment. chaque fois il montre autrement qu'il est absent, à un moment il dit qu'il est momentanément absent, à un autre il dit je suis pas là et le 3ème je crois qu'il dit je suis pas là aussi. 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 ou des gens, parce que des fois ils disent des mots assez difficiles . . . et l'autre il est normal à peu près*

'he says the same thing each time but each time it's different. Each time he shows that he's not there differently, at one point he says he's *currently unavailable*, at another he says *I'm not here* and the 3rd one I think he's says *I'm not here* as well. it depends who you're talking to because if you say *hey guys* it's that you know them well, to friends, or else you say *hello, I'm currently unavailable* that's more to people you don't know very well, you know, like business men and people, because sometimes they say difficult words . . . and the other one, it's pretty normal'

(Eva, age 9, adv.)

Eva talks about the "difficult" words she noticed, while Antoine uses the term "complicated" to qualify this same vocabulary that he identified but is unable to reproduce:

- (20) *ceux qui veulent téléphoner au monsieur ils tombent tout le temps sur la messagerie et il change tout le temps de phrase de messagerie, une fois il dit salut les gars, une autre, voilà quoi. il habite différentes maisons et il dit différentes messageries dans chaque maison. elles font un peu comme les jeunes elles font salut les gars lâchez-vous, ouais on parle un peu comme ça, c'est la 3ème. la 1ère c'est plus autoritaire, ça fait plus déjà, plus adulte. ou si je suis chez des gens. il emploie les mots assez compliqués coordonnées, je suis momentanément, il avait dit quoi déjà? je suis momentanément absent, il utilise des mots, au lieu de dire j(e) suis absent voilà*

'the people who want to phone the man they keep getting the answering machine and he keeps changing the message, once he says *hey guys*, another time, you know. he lives in different homes and he says different answering machines in each one. they sound a bit like kids do they're like *hey guys let rip*, yeah, we talk a bit like that, that's the 3rd one. the 1st one's a bit more strict, it's more like, more adult. or if I'm at someone's house. he uses quite complicated words *details*, *I'm currently*, what did he say again? *I'm currently unavailable*, he uses words, instead of saying *I'm not here* you know'

(Antoine, age 11, inter+)

As shown in the statements below, the terms *coordonnées*, *ultérieurement*, *momentanément* and *recontacterai* ('details', 'shortly', 'currently' and 'return your call') were noted by roughly 10 children as salient elements of the formal style:

- (21) *c'est pour laisser des messages et c'est tout le temps le même monsieur mais qui dit des choses différentes en fait. par exemple au 1er il demande de laisser les coordonnées et au 2ème il dit pas les coordonnées, et le 3ème c'est plutôt style racaille un peu, pour ses copains quoi*

'it's to leave messages and it's the same man all the time but actually he says different things. for example in the 1st one he asks you to leave your details and in the 2nd one he doesn't say details, and the 3rd it's more kind of chav style, for his friends, like'

(Tiphaine, age 11, inter-)

- (22) *dans la 1ère il y a des mots compliqués, comme ultérieurement, la 2ème elle est normale, et dans la 3ème c'est une personne qui parle à des copains parce qu'il dit salut les gars j(e) suis pas là lâchez-vous laissez un message. la 1ère je pense que c'est quelqu'un qui parle dans un bureau, la dernière*

c'est quelqu'un qui est chez lui, et la 2ème c'est chez lui aussi. la 1ère elle est compliquée et la dernière c'est quelqu'un, comment on pourrait dire, qui traîne souvent dans la rue et voilà il a le langage du quartier

'in the 1st one there are complicated words, like *shortly*, the 2nd one it's normal, and in the 3rd one there's someone who's talking to his friends because he says *hey guys, I'm not (h)ere let rip leave a message*. the 1st one I think it's someone talking in an office, the last one it's someone who's at home, and the 2nd one he's at home too. the 1st one is complicated and the last one it's someone, how do you say, who hangs around in the street a lot, and, you know, he speaks like the kids from the block'
(Laura, age 10, inter-)

- (23) *il était pas là et il disait qu'il fallait laisser un message. lâchez-vous les copains c'est dans le dernier, il parlait à sa femme dans le 1er. ils appellent pas c'est pas les mêmes personnages (qui/qu'ils) vont appeler. il parle à ses potes et il dit lâchez-vous. le 1er il dit coordonnées et rencontrera*

'he wasn't there and he said you had to leave him a message. *let rip mates* that's in the last one, he was talking to his wife in the 1st one. they don't call it's not the same people who're going to call. he's talking to his mates and he says *let rip*. The 1st one he says *contact details and return your call*'
(Gabriel, age 10, disadv.)

At the other end of this continuum, the informal expressions like *les gars* 'guys' and *lâchez-vous* 'let rip' were noticed by many children (80 noted the term *les gars*, 28 quoted the expression *lâchez-vous*), and were often used as a starting point to initiate the discussion about the variations. The expression *à plus* 'laters' was also noticed, albeit less often, such as in Pierre's comments:

- (24) *la 1ère phrase elle était plutôt polie si on voulait, la 2ème un petit peu moins et la 3ème elle était enfin il se relâchait un peu si on voulait. parce que au début il dit bonjour, il fait beaucoup de formules de politesse, la 2ème fois il en fait un peu moins et la 3ème c'est familier, comme salut à plus on met pas trop ça dans une conversation si on veut être des gens très polis*

'the first sentence was a lot more polite, as it were, the 2nd a little bit less, and the 3rd one was, well, he let himself go a bit, as it were. because at the beginning he says *hello*, he uses lots of polite expressions, the 2nd time he uses less and the 3rd time it's casual, like *hey, laters* you don't really say that in a conversation if you want to be someone who's very polite'
(Pierre, age 10, adv.)

According to Gadet (2002), lexical elements are a privileged locus for salience, as evidenced by the extent to which they are the focus of textbooks and prescriptive norms in general. However, the question of which level is most conducive to perceptive salience remains unresolved. For this reason, as Bell (2001) suggests, analysis of co-occurring features seems particularly relevant. On a stylistic level, Bell (1984)'s concept of *hyperstyle variables* (taken up by Armstrong 2002) seems an interesting direction to pursue in terms of salience perception: it is probable that variables for which intra-speaker variation is higher than inter-speaker variation have strong salient potential.

It appears, therefore, that certain salient features, particular of a lexical nature, are pivotal elements in the construction of judgment on style. These striking features seem to suffice, with a *halo effect* (Moreau and Brichard 1997), to categorize an utterance within a particular variety. Or they at least allow the child to describe what they feel in words, even if their impression is based upon other elements that are harder to verbalize or make conscious.

These initial analyses show that it is impossible to approach the notion of salience without taking into account the complementary, but also competing, notion of stereotype.

2.3.3 Top-down perception and social stereotypes

Top-down processing is based on a global perception of an utterance, beginning with the content. A set of expectations, based on previous representations, structures the overall impression of the utterance. These representations are influenced by the individual's past and the socially shared beliefs they hold concerning the common characteristics of a social group, i.e. *stereotypes*.

In fact the cognitive process of creating categories leads to the construction of social stereotypes (Oakes et al. 1994). Stereotyping is thus a way to create homogeneity within heterogeneity, creating apparently homogeneous social categories through metonymic effect (Lakoff 1987; Kristiansen 2001), so that a subcategory can stand for a macro-category as a whole. Linguistic stereotypes and social stereotypes are tightly linked: the process of homogenization can allow a combination of several co-occurrent linguistic features to be perceived as socially significant. Linguistic stereotypes thus also relate to the dimension of social categorization and identity, as they are seen as "distinctive and indexical units with respect to social categories" (Kristiansen 2001: 143).⁵

⁵ Linguistic stereotypes can be actualized in overall judgments of the way a social group, perceived as homogenous, speaks: the "bad French" of young people from working class areas or the "snobbish" language of speakers from wealthy backgrounds. For example, 10 year-old pupils

When style is judged during an exchange, social and individual representations come into play and focus on both the style itself and the speaker. Bourdieu (1979, 1982) highlighted this issue underlining the strength of the link between perception of varieties and judgments made about social classes.

Style interacts with a variety of representations, sometimes of an ideological nature (Irvine 2001). The addressee attributes social significance to a perceived manner of speaking, according to social stereotypes projected upon linguistic practices (Moreau and Brichard 1997).

Conversely, a speaker affirms their social identity by using style as a collection of symbolic resources through which they can construct their self-image (Irvine 2001). These symbolic resources include linguistic features, which play a specific role in the reception and production of a message.

The coexistence of these two mechanisms of perception (bottom-up and top-town) come into play in a phenomenon that we have called *stylistic restoration*⁶ and which seems to offer a good illustration of the way in which these two processes can combine.

2.3.4 Stereotypes and stylistic restoration

If salience alone were at work in representations, it would be difficult to explain the fact that some children quote elements that were not present in the audio document, as well as those that were. This process could be referred to as “stylistic restoration”.

It is remarkable that these new elements are perfectly coherent with the style in question. An interesting example is the use of the double negation *ne . . . pas*. This is a proven stylistic variable in French, used differently depending on the situation, with the inclusion of *ne* used more in formal situations.⁷ Margaux, like nine other children from the sample, uses it twice when referring to the formal

recorded in a school in a working class area of Grenoble stated that: *les maîtresses i- i:: i(ls) parlent pas comme nous / . . / i(ls) font un peu leur malin / . . / nous on fait à l'arrachée que eux i(ls) font bien* ‘the teachers, they, they don’t talk like us / . . / they’re tryin’ a bit to be smart / . . / we’re just like, whatever, where they do it properly’. In the view of these children, teachers in general speak “proper French”, something that seems to be perceived as being slightly pretentious.

⁶ We would like to thank Jean-Pierre Chevrot for this expression that offers an interesting parallel with the notion of phonemic restoration described by Warren (1970).

⁷ This variation is considered hyperstylistic, i.e., the intraspeaker variation is greater than the inter-speaker variation (Armstrong 2002), which no doubt increases its salience. On double negation, see also Gadet (1997 [1989]: 127–132).

style despite the fact the *ne* was absent from the original extracts (in the English translation, this phenomenon is rendered by the contraction ‘I’m’ vs. the more formal ‘I am’):

- (25) *c’est un truc de répondeur. il en a fait des différents. il y a celle où il parle à ses copains, c’est la dernière, celle où il parle à des gens du travail par exemple, c’est la première, et la deuxième je sais pas. la troisième il dit salut les gars et la première il dit pas des choses comme ça, il dit désolé je ne suis pas là*

‘it’s an answer machine thing. he did different ones. there’s the one when he’s talking to his friends, that’s the last one, the one when he’s talking to people from work for example, that’s the 1st one, and the 2nd one I don’t know. the 3rd one he says *hi guys* and the 1st one he doesn’t say things like that, he says *sorry I am not here*’

(Margaux, age 9, adv.)

Fabrice also reinstates a double negation, although he is unable to explain his judgment or make an explicit comment on the variation:

- (26) *c’est un monsieur qui parle, ils veulent qu’il laisse un message. il dit salut les gars laissez-moi un message, bonjour je ne suis pas là pour le moment laissez un message*

‘it’s a man who’s talking. he says *hey guys leave me a message, hello I am not here for the moment leave a message*’

(Fabien, age 10, disadv.)

In the same way, Yanis adds the *ne* and seems to found his judgment in a stereotypical representation of formal usages that he identifies with his father’s speech in a professional context:

- (27) *c’est sur un répondeur, c’est un monsieur. à un moment il dit lâchez-vous les gars laissez-moi des messages, c’est pas pareil parce que l’autre il dit bonjour je ne suis pas là laissez-moi un message. c’est que au dernier il parle avec des copains et dans le 1er il parle à des gens, enfin des gens par exemple je sais pas, si c’est un électricien par exemple, les gens si ils ont des pannes ils vont appeler et comme il est pas là il faut qu’il leur laisse un message, donc il parlerait plutôt comme au 1er. mon papa il parle comme ça*

‘it’s on an answering machine, it’s a man. at one point he says *let rip guys, leave me messages*. It’s not the same because the other one he says *hello*

I am not here leave me a message. it's 'cos in the last one he's talking with friends and in the 1st one he's talking to people, well people for example I don't know, if he's an electrician for example, people, if they've got a power cut, they'll call him and as he's not there they have to leave him a message, so he'd talk more like the 1st one. my dad talks like that'
(Yanis, age 9, inter+)

Seynabou uses a formal syntactic structure in her speech that is absent in the original utterance (the coordination with *car* a formal form of 'because' rendered by 'however' in the translation). Furthermore, she uses terminology learnt at school when qualifying the styles.

(28) *c'est un répondeur, c'est un monsieur qui parle, il utilise plusieurs moyens de langage, il parle à ses copains c'est le langage familier, le 1er c'était quand il dit vous pouvez me laisser un message car je ne suis pas là apposé je crois, et le dernier c'est le langage je me rappelle plus. il parle pas aux mêmes personnes, parce que il peut parler avec son patron, il peut parler avec ses copains, et il parle avec sa famille. dans la 1ère il parle avec son patron, la 2ème je sais plus avec qui il parle, et la 3ème il parle avec ses copains*

'it's an answering machine, it's a man talking, he uses different forms of language, he's talking to his friends, it's informal, the 1st one it was when he said **I am currently unavailable, however you may leave me a message** in apposition, I think, and the last one it's the language of, I can't remember. he's not talking to the same people, because he can talk to his boss, he can talk to his friends, and he talks to his family. in the 1st one he's talking to his boss, the 2nd one I can't remember who he's talking to, and the 3rd one he's talking to his friends'
(Seynabou, age 10, adv.)

In the same way, Kévin adds a more formal *oui* 'yes' to the quote, as well as an imperative form typical of a standard answering machine message (*Veillez me laisser un message*, rendered in the translation by the use of 'Thank you for leaving a message'):

(29) *il est jamais là, et puis il dit tout le temps de laisser un message et même à ses copains il dit qu'il est pas là et tout, en fait qu'il est là je pense. il dit pas toujours les mêmes choses, avec ses copains il dit salut les potes et tout, sinon **oui j(e) suis pas là veuillez laisser un message.** au début c'est pour sa famille, il dit gentiment*

‘he’s never there, and all the time he says to leave a message, and even to his friends he says he’s not there and everything, actually I think he is there. he doesn’t always say the same things, with his friends he says *hey mates* and everything, and otherwise **yes, I’m not here, thank you for leaving a message**. at the beginning it’s for his family, he says it nicely’
(Kévin, age 10, disadv.)

As illustrated by the previous extract, the same phenomenon occurs with the least formal style, with lexical choices also reflecting this tendency: *mates* replacing *guys* for example. In Pauline’s comments, an informal *ouais* ‘yeah’ echoes Kévin’s *oui*, and she takes on a very relaxed tone when imitating the third utterance:

- (30) *c’est un répondeur et c’est pas toutes les mêmes personnes enfin par exemple il y en a ils sont pas, enfin je sais pas trop comment expliquer en fait, ils sont genre . . . l’âge et tout. par exemple le dernier c’était un baba cool quoi et le 1er ça avait l’air d’être un peu un riche et le 2ème normal. le dernier il fait **ouais j(e) suis pas là na na na** et tout, comme ça, et l’autre il était très, je sais pas, il avait l’air très, enfin je sais pas comment expliquer, il parlait bien, on dirait je sais pas moi, une personne plus riche, pas du même âge*

‘it was an answering machine and it wasn’t always the same people, I mean, for example, there are some who aren’t, well, I don’t really know how to explain it, they’re kind of . . . their age and everything. for example the last one was a hippie you know and the 1st one it seemed like he was kind of rich and the 2nd one was normal. the last one he’s like **yeah, I’m not here bla bla bla** and everything, like that, and the other one he was very, I don’t know, he seemed very, well, I don’t know how to explain, he spoke well, it’s like, I don’t know, someone richer, not the same age’
(Pauline, age 10, inter–)

We can also note pragmatic insertions typical of a particular style. Alexandre, for example, does not make any metalinguistic comment about the variation but when quoting extracts enriches the least formal utterance with a discursive marker:

- (31) *il y avait un monsieur il était en train de laisser des messages. par exemple il disait **ah salut** sinon il disait . . . enfin il disait toujours au revoir après*

‘there was a man, he was leaving messages. For example he said **oh hi** and also he said . . . well he always said *goodbye* afterwards’
(Alexandre, age 10, inter+)

As style is intrinsically heterogeneous, these examples illustrate the fact that the addressee seeks to reduce the cognitive dissonance produced by non-congruent features and create homogeneity. *Stereotypes* direct attention and interpretation towards consonant elements according to expectations. They therefore limit the impact of discordant information, and, by a global effect of homogenization (Louvet 2005), they can even lead to information being ‘perceived’ that was not actually present in the utterance.

This notion recalls that of *erasure* posited by Irvine (2001) according to which the addressee selects certain salient features whilst disregarding others, a process that may also involve *iconization*. According to Irvine *iconizing* modifies the semiotic relationship between linguistic features and social representations, establishing a causal link between the two whereby linguistic differences function as iconic representations of social difference. The salient features retained in erasure may correspond to those foregrounded in the process of iconization. The addressee thus forms a consistent representation of an utterance and eradicates internal variation.

Moreau and Brichard (1997) refer to an effect of contamination, which they name the *effet de halo* (halo effect), that extends a social stereotype to an entire utterance, emphasizing certain characteristics and eclipsing others. Thus, these authors claim that the set of expectations created by social stereotypes is a determining factor in how variation is evaluated. They qualify this position, however, by invoking the potential adjustments that can be generated by certain salient features.

3 Discussion and conclusion

3.1 Halo and stylistic restoration effects

The fact that references are made predominantly to lexical elements rather than other linguistic levels could be due to differing degrees of conscious awareness of the phenomena. Children may perceive a set of elements (lexical, morphosyntactic, pragmatic, phonological and prosodic) but only be able to explain some of these verbally (e.g., the lexical elements that are easier to identify and retrieve). The other levels are not ignored, even though a metapragmatic comment cannot yet be made on the subject: children perceive the characteristic features, assimilate them and are able to reproduce some of them, or even call upon representational schemata to produce others not heard on this occasion.

This over-riding tendency to refer to lexical features may also be explained in part by parental influence. Adults’ positive and negative reinforcement of

children's speech tends to focus above all upon lexical elements: polite/impolite forms, swear words, etc. as noted by Ely and Berko Gleason (1995).

Furthermore, given that an utterance includes a set of more or less congruent features, some more salient than others in certain contexts on a perceptive level, and that speakers' judgments are based upon a global understanding of these, the following hypothesis can be formulated: the fact that the child frequently hears certain groups of elements together, enables them to create a mental schema of style, i.e., to build an overall approximate stereotypical representation. The variations heard in the input are not of a random nature and the child perceives, in certain specific utterances produced in given situations, marks of varying coherency that are more frequently produced in conjunction than separately.

Thus, it could be said that representations of style are based upon semi-conscious stereotypical schemata that are put into play, elaborated and perpetually reconfigured according to the interactions encountered.

3.2 An helicoidal process

This study of 9- to 11-year-olds has allowed us to reach a better understanding of both the process of representation and the criteria upon which children base their judgments concerning style, as well as the way in which these judgments are updated through metapragmatic discourse on variation.

The analyses show that more than 60% of 9- to 11-year-olds are able to make spontaneous metapragmatic comments regarding the variation with which they are presented. In doing so, they call upon criteria related to the social status of the speaker, the norm or the characteristics of the interaction.

Furthermore, qualitative analysis of the spontaneous responses reveals that the construction of representations functions in a number of complex ways (cf. Figure 2). It would seem that children discern certain salient features of styles (often on a prosodic or lexical level). These then activate cognitive schemata according to which stylistic value is then given to the production. Through a double "halo" and "stylistic restoration" effect, the whole of the utterance is thus categorized as belonging to a particular style. A heterogeneous linguistic reality is thus transformed into a stereotypical and homogenous reconstruction.

As illustrated in Figure 2, updated stereotypes influence in turn the salience of the elements perceived. The overall process does not necessarily contain only conscious aspects; certain stages can be considered epipragmatic. However, stylistic restoration and verbalization of metadiscourse belong to the realm of metapragmatic awareness (in grey on the diagram): the ability to put perceived

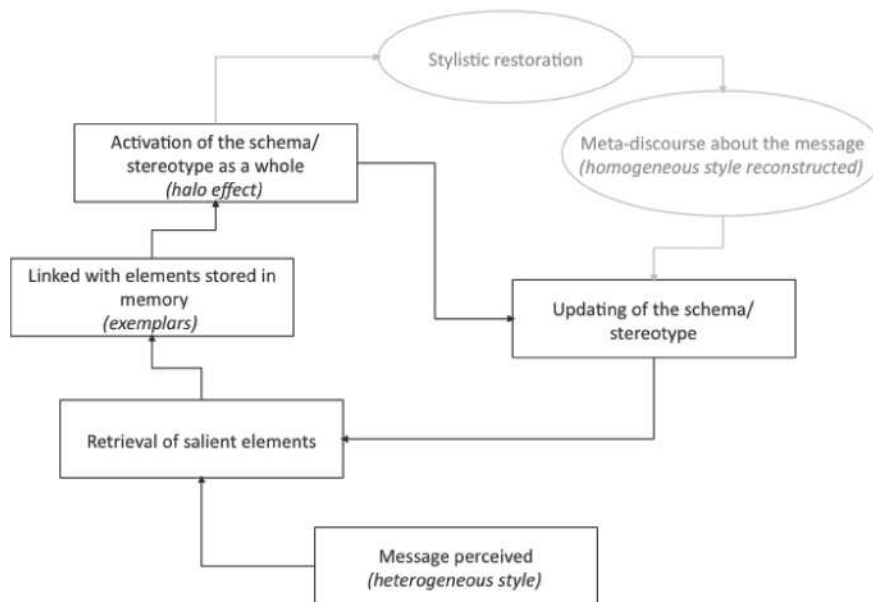


Fig. 2: Schema for the process of constructing representations of stylistic variation

variations into words is, in itself, a factor in updating representations and cognitive schemata.

In our opinion, our data illustrate a tendency that is two-fold: firstly, the identification of essentially lexical and prosodic salient features; secondly the *stereotypical reconstruction* of the utterances, shown by the use of markers absent from the original utterances but that are contextually coherent.

Salience and stereotype are not mutually exclusive and attitudes do indeed appear to be constructed around the two intertwined representational modalities. According to Michinov and Monteil (2003), salient features are actually category indexes that activate stereotypes and social identity. Within the context of exemplar theory, this process corresponds to retrieving an *exemplar* (a linguistic form stored in memory with phonological, social and contextual information intact) that most resembles the perceived input. This resemblance is not fixed as such, and depends a great deal upon the context as many factors can make one element or another more salient for a particular addressee in a specific situation (Smith and Zarate 1992). The accumulation of *exemplars* could thus develop awareness of the link between forms and contexts (Foulkes and Docherty 2006).

From this perspective, there would therefore be numerous interactions between top-down and bottom-up perceptive modalities:

- the salience of certain elements would depend upon internalized stereotypes and contribute to reconfiguring them;
- stereotypical schemata would be retrieved and enhanced by new elements, in a continuous process allowing these schemata to be updated;
- the frequency of perceptive experiences in different contexts would allow conscious representations to emerge.

From a sociocognitive point of view, *salience* is thus a phenomenon that activates *social stereotypes*, but also contributes to updating them. This dynamic process of reconfiguring schemata in turn influences the *salient* nature of variables.

It is therefore probable that bottom-up and top-down processes work by interaction rather than opposition: salience is based upon stereotypes and yet also reinforces them, in a mutually enhancing helicoidal process constructing social meaning.

This approach can be compared to Kristiansen (2001, 2003, 2008)'s *metonymic perception* in which a single feature can suffice to activate a set of features corresponding to the representational pattern of a particular style. This judgment may then be modified by the presence of other salient features that can contribute to a reconfiguration of the original stereotype. Studies by Finegan and Biber (2001), Bell (2001), and Irvine (2001) also recognize this interaction between top-down and bottom-up processes.

These constant interactions and reconfigurations can be triggered at different moments of an exchange and following different discursive events, for example during *commutations stylistiques* (*style switches*, Buson 2009) or when a feature appears in contrast with the stereotype. This tension between the homogeneity of operative levels and the reality of stylistic heterogeneity, between salience and stereotype, between expected and unexpected practices, is at the heart of thought on speakers' evaluation of variation.

In conclusion, children's metapragmatic abilities are based upon complex evaluative processes calling upon both the perception of variables of varying salience and the updating of constantly evolving social representations. Salience and social stereotypes underpin the entire process of stylistic evaluation – and thus the ability to produce a context-appropriate message in return – and prove highly interdependent.

Metapragmatic competence is based upon the interiorization of norms, the symbolic construction of social roles and the ability to take into account the self and other as volitional agents within communication. The child can be seen to possess both conscious and semi-conscious representations of variation, with the extent of *epi* vs. *meta* varying according to elements such as age and social background.

This observation allows us to suggest that the development of receptive competence is largely dependent upon the social background and network in which the child evolves. This link remains to be studied further within a framework that must be interdisciplinary and that takes into account cognitive processes, social aspects and the developmental dynamic.

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