

# Expectation through imitation: towards a unified protocol for roleplay in developmental sociolinguistics

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5 **Keywords:** sociolinguistic expectations, children, roleplay elicitation, roleplay identification, English  
6 in Dutch

## 7 **Abstract**

8 Roleplay, as a form of speaker imitation, has commonly been used as a tool to investigate the  
9 emergence of sociolinguistic expectations in children. In this paper, we integrate previous  
10 methodological insights on roleplay with the aim to draft a unified protocol for its design and analysis  
11 in (developmental) (socio)linguistics. Special attention is paid to guiding principles for (1) role  
12 selection, (2) roleplay elicitation, (3) roleplay identification, (4) isolation of the linguistic variable and  
13 (5) cross-verification of the results. The roleplay protocol is applied to a case study on English  
14 insertions in Belgian Dutch by five preadolescents, where it seems to effectively capture sociolinguistic  
15 expectations: respondents increasingly insert English elements in their performances of English-  
16 oriented roles (e.g. *rapper*) and limit those elements in their performances of Dutch-oriented roles (e.g.  
17 *farmer*). Overall, this paper unites previous insights on the implementation of roleplay designs, aiming  
18 to further empirical investigations into speaker imitation in developmental sociolinguistics and the  
19 study of linguistic behavior in roleplay in general.

## 20 **1 Introduction**

21 In their everyday lives, language users encounter a variety of interlocutors and contexts, each  
22 associated with a specific type of language use. These repeated indexical links between linguistic  
23 variants and connected social information give rise to sociolinguistic expectations. For instance,  
24 language users tend to link a higher pitch more readily to women than to men, and they assume that a  
25 medical professional will employ a formal and standard language register toward young patients  
26 (Drager et al., 2021; Rombouts et al., 2023). One convenient way of exploring such expectations is  
27 imitation: when we mimic another speaker, we often convert our perception of that speaker's language  
28 use (viz. our expectations) into our production (see for example, Preston, 1992). Because imitation is  
29 natural to and generally accessible for children, it is frequently employed as a tool for sociolinguistic  
30 research with these young learners. In the field of developmental sociolinguistics, researchers for  
31 instance rely on roleplay to investigate at what age children start to develop (various types of)  
32 sociolinguistic expectations (cf. Andersen, 1990: 56). These studies have yielded valuable insights for  
33 the field, generating interest in the methodological framework underpinning the roleplay set-ups.  
34 However, current work rarely elaborates on the methodology behind the roleplay activities.

35 In this paper, we present a protocol aimed at optimizing roleplay as a method to elicit sociolinguistic  
36 expectations, derived from a close scrutiny of previous work. We illustrate the effectiveness of this  
37 protocol through a case study examining expectations regarding English insertions in Belgian Dutch.  
38 Below, we first provide the necessary background for this study, synthesizing previous research on

39 roleplay (Section 1.1) and briefly introducing our specific case study (Section 1.2) to then formulate  
40 the research aims (Section 2). This is followed by a detailed presentation of the unified roleplay  
41 protocol (Section 3). Section 4 presents the results of the implementation of the roleplay methodology  
42 in our case study. Finally, the implications of our results and the potential of our roleplay protocol for  
43 future research are summarized in Section 5.

### 44 **1.1 Roleplay**

45 Roleplay, also referred to as ‘pretend play’, ‘imaginary play’ or ‘socio-dramatic play’, is a form of  
46 imitation that spontaneously occurs in children's daily reality (Goldman, 2005: 91; Nourot, 2015: 88).  
47 This imitation of others quite naturally comes with alterations in gestures, facial expressions and voice  
48 quality, as well as changes in actual language use. In that sense, roleplay is reminiscent of the practice  
49 of stylization (Rampton, 1999), which can be defined as alternations to the speakers conventional  
50 speech production. In the literature, the link between children’s roleplay and language use has been  
51 documented in two ways. First, younger children in particular seem to change their language use to  
52 demarcate the roleplay register from their normal self (see Strand, 2022: 16-19 for an overview).  
53 Second, children, when growing older, can also change their language use imitating ‘distinctive  
54 features’ of specific social roles they are impersonating (Harris, 2000: 35; Ervin-Tripp, 1973: 273).  
55 How these perspectives are related is currently an open question. Nonetheless, roleplay proves to be a  
56 rich data source, providing an insight into children’s expectations on language use. As roleplay further  
57 occurs quite naturally in children’s activities, it has become a popular tool in the field of  
58 (developmental) (socio)linguistics (cf. De Vogelaer and Katerbow, 2017).

59 Overall, roleplay research, both general work on e.g. cognitive development (see Nicolopoulou, 2018),  
60 and work adopting a linguistic focus, is conducted from a variety of theoretical frameworks which has  
61 ramifications for the method that is used (elicitation, observation) and the analysis that is conducted  
62 (quantitative, qualitative, ...). Aggregating over these differences, we aim to provide an overview of  
63 the roleplay methodology that has previously been implemented. For this overview, we first selected  
64 broadly, taking into account research implementing a roleplay methodology, after which we singled  
65 out all studies with a linguistic component. For the final selection, we only included roleplay research  
66 adopting a sociolinguistic focus, investigating a specific variation pattern for particular social roles  
67 (excluding the imitation of age groups like ‘babies’). We refer readers interested in a more  
68 comprehensive overview to Strand (2022) and Nicolopoulou (2018)<sup>1</sup>. Next, from the complete list of  
69 these sociolinguistic references (see Supplement 1) we selected one study per author (and per method)  
70 resulting in 10 key studies: Andersen (1990), Kyratzis (2010), García-Sánchez (2010), Kleemann  
71 (2012), Katerbow (2013), Paugh (2019), de León (2019), Mooney (2020), Kaiser (2022) and Strand  
72 (2022). Below, we elaborate on the 10 studies under scrutiny, for which we identify five key steps in  
73 the roleplay methodology (see Table 1 for a complete synthesis).

74 A first step is role selection, viz. determining which roles will be performed in the roleplay activities.  
75 In naturalistic studies, the selection of roles is left to the children themselves (see Kyratzis, 2010;  
76 García-Sánchez, 2010; de León, 2019; Mooney, 2020). For instance, in a rural farmer village in  
77 Dominica, Paugh (2019) observed children’s spontaneous play scenarios featuring ‘teachers’ and  
78 ‘hunters’. In this type of bottom-up role selection, roles can also be non-human, as in Kleemann (2012)  
79 who analyzed two Norwegian children’s dragon play. In more controlled roleplay studies, conversely,  
80 the researcher selects the roles a priori to elicit language variation in children as a proxy of their

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<sup>1</sup> Supplement 2 furthermore provides a list of additional studies focusing on the linguistics of roleplay (and identification parameters), see Section 3.3.

81 sociolinguistic expectations. Popular choices are ‘doctors’ (see Andersen, 1990) and ‘sellers’ (see  
82 Katerbow, 2013; Kaiser, 2022). This popularity likely ensues from the connection of these roles to  
83 formal situations, inviting the use of standard language. The hypothesis underlying the selection of  
84 these roles is thus based on a general indexical link (e.g. between standard language and formal roles),  
85 rather than on empirical research supporting the assumed community-wide expectations on the  
86 language used by the specific role.

87 A second step, then, is the roleplay itself, which like the role selection shows variation between studies  
88 in several ways. In terms of the roleplay set-up, roleplay has been investigated for individual children  
89 (Andersen, 1990), pairs of children (Katerbow, 2013) or larger groups (cf. Kaiser, 2022; Strand, 2022),  
90 generally not below the age of 3 y/o (see Andersen, 1990: 80 for a reflection), with a focus on 4- to 7  
91 year-olds (e.g. Katerbow, 2013; Kaiser, 2022) and occasional studies in (pre)adolescence (e.g. de León,  
92 2019). Further, the implementation of the roleplay mainly varies depending on the theoretical  
93 framework and on the resulting degree of control exerted by the researcher. For instance, where some  
94 studies focus on roleplay utterances resulting organically from free play (cf. Paugh, 2019; Kleemann,  
95 2012; Kyratzis, 2010; de León, 2019), others implement roleplay elicitation strategies to investigate  
96 anticipated shifts in children’s language use. In the latter studies, researchers try to find a balance  
97 between ‘control’ and ‘improvisation’, allowing children to be creative and imaginative within a certain  
98 methodological set-up (cf. Andersen, 1990: 76, who introduced the label of ‘controlled  
99 improvisation’). A first way to find such a balance and to elicit roleplay is by offering the young  
100 participants props, decors and/or costumes. Andersen (1990) for instance investigates children’s  
101 roleplay through doctor, patient and nurse hand puppets, Strand (2022) used i.a. a furnished doll’s  
102 house and a fire station, and Katerbow (2013; see also Kaiser, 2022) set up a little play shop to  
103 investigate seller-buyer dialogues. Next, involvement of the researcher in the pretend dialogues also  
104 affects the degree of control. In some studies, the researcher actively participates in the roleplay  
105 (Andersen, 1990), whereas other studies rely on unmonitored observation (Katerbow, 2013; Strand,  
106 2022). Third, the instructions used to elicit roleplay can vary on a continuum from minimal intervention  
107 (e.g. simply allowing the children to ‘play’ with the play shop; cf. Katerbow 2013) to explicit prompts  
108 (the researcher explicitly describing the scene, topic and context in Andersen 1990 or giving prompts  
109 in Kaiser, 2022). Finally, the number of roles in the elicitation process, as well as the design (see e.g.  
110 Strand, 2022 and Mooney, 2020 for a longitudinal approach) and the duration of the roleplay activity  
111 can differ. Yet, most elicitation research is cross-sectional and focuses on one (contrasting) pair of  
112 roles (e.g. seller and buyer), performed by children one after the other or simultaneously (using two  
113 hand puppets, cf. Andersen, 1990) in a time frame typically under 30 minutes.

114 The third and fourth steps concern the analysis of linguistic performance in the roleplay setting in order  
115 to uncover the hypothesized links between role performance and language use. First, utterances  
116 including role enactment need to be identified clearly. This is not straightforward, as roleplay involves  
117 different stages. For instance, when children ‘enter into play’ or ‘negotiate their roles’ they are typically  
118 not yet talking ‘in character’ (Shoecraft, 2018: 139; Dunn, 2003). Therefore, utterances produced  
119 during these stages should be disregarded for further analysis. Some of the studies under scrutiny (e.g.  
120 Kleemann, 2012; Katerbow, 2013; Strand, 2022) mention specific parameters to identify roleplay e.g.  
121 changes in voice quality or deviance from reality, yet for most studies it is not entirely clear through  
122 which criteria (stages in) roleplay are identified. Second, the linguistic variable under scrutiny needs  
123 to be tagged. Here again, multiple approaches can be taken, varying from Labovian-inspired  
124 variationist research focusing on standard vs. dialectal forms (Katerbow, 2013), to studies on code-  
125 switching (Kleemann, 2012) or speech acts and specialized role-specific vocabulary (Andersen, 1990).  
126 Finally, the link is established between the linguistic variable and the role performed. Comparisons are

127 made either between roles, or to non-roleplay utterances (cf. the two perspectives on roleplay  
128 mentioned earlier in this section). An example of the first option is Andersen (1990), who identified  
129 more medical terminology and direct imperatives in the doctor role vs. the patient and nurse roles. The  
130 latter approach is taken in Katerbow (2013), who found children as of four years old use more standard  
131 forms for seller and buyer than in their spontaneous speech. This is resonated in Kaiser (2022) who  
132 observed a similar increase of standard forms for the same roles. For this last observation, however, it  
133 is unclear whether children hold expectations of more ‘standard’ forms for ‘buyer’ and ‘seller’  
134 specifically, or if children switch to a standard variety when engaged in roleplay in general, irrespective  
135 of the role assumed.

136 The fifth and final step in roleplay research is an optional post-test to boost the reliability of the results  
137 gained through the roleplay method. For instance, Kaiser (2022), compares the results of their roleplay  
138 task in a play shop (viz. more standard forms) to the language use of the same children in a ‘memory’  
139 game task and a narration task, both conducted twice, by two different researchers, one speaking in  
140 dialect and one in standard language. Thus, they aim to map if children indeed shift between standard  
141 and dialect varieties according to the communicative setting. Results confirm this expectation: similar  
142 to the performances of the formal seller-buyer roles, the children boosted their standard forms in the  
143 game and narration task with a standard-speaking researcher. Katerbow (2013), then, focused amongst  
144 others on an open-ended interview with parents, asking them questions about their attitudes towards  
145 standard and dialect variation. These attitudes can be tied back to the children’s shifting patterns in the  
146 roleplay: one child, for instance, continues using dialect forms in his performances, which can be  
147 explained by his parents’ fostering of dialect use in the home.

148 The roleplay studies reviewed above (see Table 1 for a complete synthesis) have each led to promising  
149 results on children’s linguistic expectations: children can adjust their language use to the role (play)  
150 they perform as early as 4 to 6 years of age, suggesting sociolinguistic expectations on those roles start  
151 developing around those ages (viz. Andersen, 1990; Katerbow, 2013). Yet, it is striking how much  
152 (methodological) variation exists in the limited number of sociolinguistic roleplay studies available.  
153 Moreover, it is currently not straightforward to build upon these studies, as an integrated protocol that  
154 synthesizes the different choices made in roleplay research is currently absent. In this paper, our goal  
155 is to arrive at such a protocol, outlining and detailing the choices included for each of the steps  
156 mentioned above, viz. role selection, roleplay elicitation, roleplay identification, isolation of the  
157 linguistic variable and cross-verification of the results. In this effort, we target roleplay methodology  
158 for preadolescent children and older. To illustrate the protocol’s effectiveness, we will apply it to a  
159 case study on English elements in Belgian Dutch, the sociolinguistic expectations on which have been  
160 thoroughly documented in prior work which lends the case well to research through roleplay.

Study	Role selection	Roleplay elicitation				Roleplay identification	Isolation of the linguistic variable			Cross-verification (in same study)
		Degree of control	Respondents		Temporal characteristics		Variation pattern	Type of analysis	Comparison type	
			Age	Configuration						
Andersen 1990	imposed, 3 triads: [nurse, doctor, patient], [mother, father, child], [teacher, student, foreign student]	props: hand puppets representing the roles  researcher present, impersonating one of the roles with hand puppet	4-7	N=24, individual participation	cross-sectional study; 3 consecutive sessions (1 per triad) of 30 minutes	unknown	triad-specific: babytalk, doctor talk, foreigner talk, teacher talk and male vs. female talk features	mixed methods: morphology, phonology, lexicon	comparison between RP and non-RP, comparison between roles	NA
Kyrtziz 2010	spontaneous (e.g. seller, buyer, birthday girl)	researcher present	Pre-school	N=8, organic group formation	longitudinal	unknown	Spanish vs. English	qualitative: language socialization	unclear	NA
García-Sánchez 2010	spontaneous (e.g. girls in a sitcom/soap)	researcher present	8-11	N=6, organic group formation	longitudinal	unknown	Spanish vs. Moroccan Arabic	qualitative: language socialization	comparison between RP and non-RP	NA
Kleemann 2012	spontaneous (e.g. dragon, princess)	researcher present	3-6	N=16, organic group formation	longitudinal, 1-16 minutes per session (N=39)	raised pitch, verbs in present tense, caricature of Norwegian dialect	North Sámi vs. Norwegian	qualitative: code-switching	comparison between RP and non-RP	NA
Katerbow 2013	imposed: seller and buyer	decor: play shop no researcher present	3;9-6;10	N=23, participation in pairs	cross-sectional and longitudinal, 15 min per session	voice quality, meta-communication	standard vs. vernacular in Moselle-Franconian	quantitative: phonology, lexicon	comparison between RP and non-RP	a.o. Lego building video, interview with parents
Paugh 2019	spontaneous (e.g. teacher, hunter, farmer, bus driver)	researcher present	3-11	N=4, group of 4	longitudinal	unknown	Patwa vs. English	qualitative: language socialization	comparison between roles	NA
de León 2019	spontaneous (e.g. ice cream seller)	researcher present	5-13	N=5, groups of 2-3	longitudinal	unknown	Tzotzil vs. Spanish	qualitative: language socialization	comparison between roles	NA
Mooney 2020	spontaneous (e.g. mother and babysitter, hairdresser)	no researcher present	5;2-6;6	N=2, in a pair	longitudinal, 6-13 min per session (N=3)	unknown	standard vs. vernacular in (American) English	quantitative: phonology, vowel spaces	comparison between RP and non-RP, comparison between roles	parent surveys
Kaiser 2022	imposed: seller and buyer	decor: play shop props: shopping items, fake money researcher present giving prompts	3;4-6;4	N=49, groups of 3-4	cross-sectional	unknown	standard vs. vernacular in Bavarian	quantitative: phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon	comparison between RP and non-RP	4 other semi-experimental designs (e.g. 2x memory game, narration task)
Strand 2022	spontaneous (e.g. fireman)	props: doll's house, fire truck engine, firefighters, fire station  no researcher present	3-4	N=7, groups of approx. 3	longitudinal, 100 min per session (N=18)	deviance from reality, voice quality, holding dolls/props; speech in reply to one of the above	standard vs. vernacular in Norwegian	mixed methods: morphology, phonology	comparison between RP and non-RP	NA

**Table 1:** overview of roleplay methodology, with RP= roleplay and respondent age in [years;months]

## 162 1.2 Case study: expectations on English insertions in Belgian Dutch

163 Our case study is situated in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, where Dutch is the official  
164 language. Other languages include French (spoken in the southern part of Belgium) and German  
165 (spoken in the far east). Despite having no official status in Flanders, English has obtained a strong  
166 presence in society: English insertions<sup>2</sup> are used in a variety of communicative contexts like chat  
167 conversations (De Dekker and Vandekerckhove, 2012), tv shows (Zenner et al., 2015) and soccer  
168 reporting (Hiel and Zenner, 2023). Considering age stratification, English elements are largely  
169 observed in the speech of the younger generations (Authors, 2022), including preadolescents who will  
170 make up the respondent sample of this study (see Section 3.2). An attitudinal study by Crombez et al.  
171 (2022) further supports this age link, indicating younger participants have a stronger preference for  
172 English insertions over Dutch alternatives than older participants do (+50 y/o). Finally, perceptual  
173 dialectological work by Authors (2023) shows how language users expect more English in the Dutch  
174 of teenagers than in surrounding age groups. All in all, these societal and age-related patterns confirm  
175 the presence of sociolinguistic expectations on the use of English insertions in Belgian Dutch.

## 176 2 Aims

177 Following the potential of roleplay for developmental sociolinguistic inquiry and tuning in with the  
178 insights from earlier studies, this paper's aims are:

- 179 (1) to integrate previous methods of roleplay research into a unified protocol that allows to  
180 optimally capture sociolinguistic expectations in roleplay performance;
- 181 (2) to apply the resulting protocol in a case study where we verify Belgian Dutch-speaking  
182 preadolescents' expectations on the use of English by particular social roles.

## 183 3 Method: measuring sociolinguistic expectations through a unified roleplay protocol

184 Our methodological integration (cf. Aim 1) starts off from the five steps in roleplay research design  
185 identified above (see Section 1.1). Below, we provide guidelines to implement each of these steps, with  
186 special attention to the outline of and implications in the decision-making process. For each step, we  
187 also indicate how we applied the protocol to our case on English use in Belgian Dutch (cf. Aim 2). To  
188 this end, we work with five Dutch-speaking preadolescents girls in Flanders, a small subset of the  
189 respondent sample of the 'Playing with English' project (see Authors 2022, p. 5). The girls are aged  
190 between 11 and 13 years old (see Figure 2, Section 3.2) and play together in the same hockey team.  
191 Finally, note that a unified protocol is less relevant for naturalistic roleplay observation, as it goes  
192 against the principle of 'naturalness'. Hence, the rest of this paper will focus on elicited roleplay solely.

### 193 3.1 Role selection

194 When setting up a roleplay study targeting sociolinguistic expectations, the first choice to be made is  
195 which social roles (e.g. 'mother', 'doctor', 'teenager') will be performed by the respondents. In this  
196 respect, it is important to ascertain role familiarity for the age group under scrutiny, verifying whether  
197 children have a clear idea of the role concept. In addition, at least some type of empirical support is  
198 needed to arrive at testable hypotheses on the relationship between the linguistic variable and the social  
199 role. Either the link between the linguistic and social categories can be established fairly generally (e.g.  
200 between standard language and formality, see Section 1.1) and then be translated into particular social

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we do not elaborate on the distinction between borrowing and code-switching (see Backus, 2014, for a detailed account): we use the label 'English insertion' to refer to English elements in Dutch.

201 roles through assumptions of the researcher. Alternatively, the (perceived) linguistic behavior of certain  
 202 social roles in the community can also be established more directly, through a literature review, a  
 203 pretest based on focus groups, a survey or through experimental approaches (e.g. a rating task),  
 204 depending on the feasibility regarding the age of the child respondents. This has the benefit of gathering  
 205 extra support of the assumed link between the social role and the variable. Furthermore, this more  
 206 explicit empirical support can help to interpret the results of the roleplay dialogues, particularly in case  
 207 children would not portray the anticipated variation pattern. In these cases, it is, for instance, important  
 208 to know whether there are effectively community expectations on the role to begin with, which the  
 209 child is deviating from.

210 *Application.* We selected the roles for our case study based on the results of the sociolinguistic  
 211 expectation survey (see Authors, 2023) that identified community expectations on English use for 19  
 212 social roles. Specifically, Authors (2023) report on a questionnaire in which  $N=177$  adult respondents  
 213 rated the expected use of English for these roles on a 7-point Likert scale varying from ‘never’ to ‘all  
 214 the time’ (see Table 2).

215 **Table 2:** Likert scale question (taken from Authors, 2023: 6 and translated into English)

How often do these social roles use English words in Dutch when performing their role <sup>3</sup> , according to you?								
	never	very rarely	rarely	sometimes	often	very often	all the time	I don't know
[social role]	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

216 The results indicate that adult language users expect ‘modern roles’ like *gamer*, *film star*, *rapper* and  
 217 *soccer player* to use English words in their Dutch highly frequently ( $M=5.91$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ), whereas  
 218 ‘public roles’ such as *primary school teacher*, *news reader* and *prime minister* ( $M=3.93$ ,  $SD=0.85$ )  
 219 and ‘traditional’ roles like *farmer* and *butcher* ( $M=3.18$ ,  $SD=0.75$ ) are not perceived to insert English  
 220 elements, but rather to use only Dutch. To establish which of these roles were sufficiently familiar to  
 221 our young audience, we conducted a pretest interview with  $N=13$  preadolescent children (6-13 y/o) not  
 222 included in our participant sample used for the study reported here (see Section 3.2). In this pretest, we  
 223 first asked the children to name all ‘sorts of people’ they knew, gathering bottom-up familiarity with  
 224 the roles. Second, we asked children to provide descriptions for the sample of  $N=19$  roles. Based on  
 225 these interviews, we selected the roles portraying the most familiarity and the most homogeneous  
 226 descriptions. This led us to include *rapper*, *soccer player* and *gamer* as English-oriented roles and  
 227 *prime minister* and *farmer* as Dutch-oriented roles.

228 **3.2 Roleplay elicitation**

229 A second step in the protocol concerns deciding how the roleplay will be elicited and how much control  
 230 is strived for. The desired **degree of control** needs to be established for at least four factors. A first  
 231 factor relates to the number of children participating in one roleplay task. On the one hand, respondents  
 232 participating in groups or pairs usually quite naturally arrive at roleplay scenes but risk to be primed  
 233 by group members. On the other hand, respondents performing roleplay individually are less likely to  
 234 be primed, however, need more guidance, which is usually provided by the researcher (who, in turn,  
 235 can be a source of priming too). As such, this is closely related to the second factor of control.

<sup>3</sup> In the survey, it was clarified to respondents that ‘performing their role’ corresponds to e.g. a gamer while gaming, a farmer while farming or a teacher while teaching (see Authors 2023: 394).

236 The degree to which the researcher participates in the roleplay is a second crucial point of control:  
237 depending on the (theoretical) framework adopted, either they are absent (a more naturalistic setting if  
238 it concerns a researcher who is a stranger to the respondent) or present (more control). In case of the  
239 latter, the researcher may merely be observing or conversely actively participating in the roleplay  
240 dialogues (playing e.g. the nurse hand puppet in Andersen, 1990). One motivation for having a  
241 researcher attend or participate in a session is to ensure children understand the task and complete it  
242 appropriately. At the same time, the researcher is always influencing the children's behavior in some  
243 way, for instance as an 'outsider' creating an awkwardness during the roleplay. There is no one-size-  
244 fits-all solution to make this choice, as it depends on the age of the children (younger children need  
245 more instruction) and their relationship with the researcher. However, we do recommend to pretest the  
246 design with a small group of children with the target age in order to make an informed decision on the  
247 degree to which the researcher will be involved in the task.

248 This brings us to the third element of control, namely the instructions given to the participants to engage  
249 in the roleplay dialogues. It is recommended to consider topic control, as well as narrative control in  
250 those instructions, especially when roleplay elicitation is implemented with different respondent  
251 groups. For instance, topic control, or more specifically providing respondents with a topic (instead of  
252 free play) is a convenient way to keep respondents close to their role, viz. to avoid roleplays with  
253 'sellers' talking about their 'favorite pop star' instead of 'selling groceries'. The topic of a play is  
254 furthermore particularly important when it is known to be a predictor for the linguistic variation pattern  
255 under scrutiny. Dialect forms are for instance more likely to be used in conversations about local rather  
256 than global topics (cf. Blom and Gumperz, 1972). In addition, narrative control, viz. stability of the  
257 type of narrative in the roleplay (describing a miracle, a problem, a quest), is equally important. As a  
258 matter of fact, the language use in a funny and positive play can be very different from the language  
259 that appears in a story involving a catastrophe, regardless of the role assumed.

260 Fourth, the use of props, decors, and costumes needs to be carefully considered. On the one hand, we  
261 believe that incorporating such props has notable advantages, in that they (1) stimulate imagination  
262 and let (younger) respondents ease into the play, (2) present visual cues to create a shared understanding  
263 of the role and (3) limit the participant to playing that one role (avoiding undesired role shifts). On the  
264 other hand, we argue that they also present drawbacks: if a researcher selects and offers specific  
265 materials, this (1) involves a considerable amount of steering. As such, (2) props, decors and costumes  
266 are clear semiotic resources respondents can use to demarcate their shift to the new role, making  
267 changes to their language use less necessary, and therefore less likely as well. In addition, (3) the visual  
268 cues of those costumes, props and decors can be seen as stereotypes imposed by the researcher which  
269 could compromise the reliability of the research.

270 All in all, and most importantly, a researcher must weigh the advantages and drawbacks of these  
271 elements of control considering the theoretical framework, the participant group under scrutiny  
272 (including age and sample size) and the linguistic variable that is targeted. In this endeavor, a balance  
273 must be struck between stimulating imagination, putting participants at ease and optimal elicitation of  
274 that linguistic variable in question.

275 One way to find that balance is to opt for **multifaceted roleplay**. This means roleplay is elicited in  
276 multiple stages and/or different ways, e.g. through a longitudinal design (Strand, 2022) or by expanding  
277 the length of a role play session. The latter is possible through variation in the design, e.g. in the  
278 presence of the researcher, the instructions and the use of props and costumes (see also 'Application').  
279 For instance, hand puppets or decors can be used in a first stage, whereas a second stage will focus on  
280 roleplay without extra resources. Alternatively, the researcher can be present in the first stage, but leave



281 the room afterwards (if appropriate considering the age of the respondents). Combining different  
 282 rounds of roleplay (longitudinally, or by lengthening a roleplay session) allows for collecting more  
 283 data and hence reduces the risk of data sparseness. The rounds can also be arranged in a way that lets  
 284 children ease into the roleplay without feeling uncomfortable.

285 *Application.* In our study, roleplay is elicited for a (limited) sample of five Belgian Dutch-speaking  
 286 preadolescent girls (11-13 y/o; see Figure 2 below), who participated in a group task. Factoring in the  
 287 characteristics of our respondent sample, we applied the principles of considered control and  
 288 multifaceted roleplay through a three-step group elicitation protocol involving role description, role  
 289 performance and a role interview (see Figure 1). This protocol is iteratively performed for each role in  
 290 the order *gamer, farmer, rapper, soccer player* and *prime minister*, alternating English- and Dutch-  
 291 prone roles.

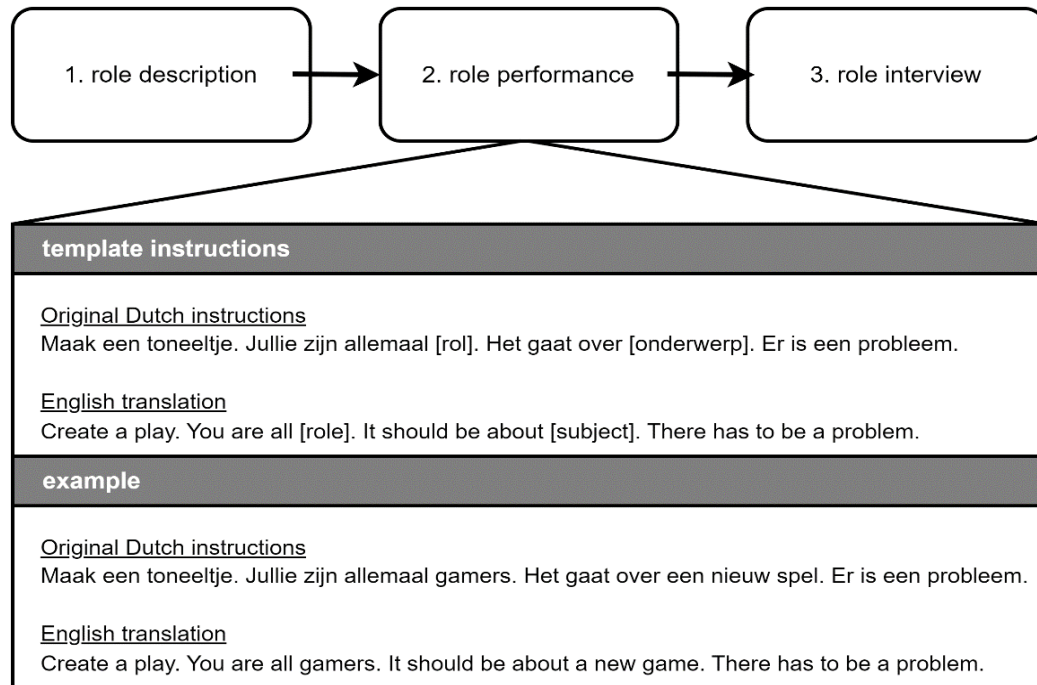


Figure 1: three -step elicitation protocol

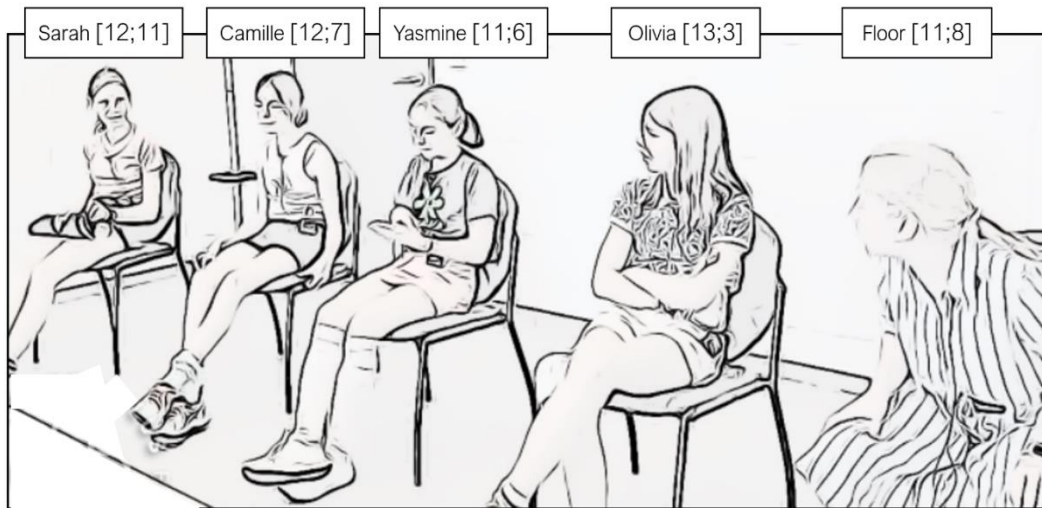
292 The first phase of **role description** instructs respondents to think of a new name, a new age and outfit  
 293 (including corresponding accessories or equipment); and new hobbies for themselves in the role they  
 294 are assigned. This approach allows to spark the respondents' imagination without imposing the control  
 295 of using physical props and costumes. The second phase, then, involves a **role performance** task on  
 296 the basis of an instruction sheet<sup>4</sup>. This sheet tells respondents to create a play in which they are all a  
 297 [gamer] (or another role) and in which the topic varies per role and the narrative structure is stable over  
 298 all roleplays<sup>5</sup> (see Figure 1). For each play, the researcher leaves the room during a small window of

<sup>4</sup> Depending on the age of the respondents, it can be wise to include child-friendly strategies. In this study, we e.g. used a treasure box including five yellow Kinder Eggs which contained the instruction sheets. In addition, it is recommended to check the difficulty of the language use in all instructions and to reflect on the mode (written/oral) of these instructions. For instance, in our design, we checked all words for age-of-acquisition ratings in Dutch (see Brysbaert et al. 2014).

<sup>5</sup> This is crucial for the use of English insertions in Dutch, as previous research has observed topic effects (more English for IT/sports, cf. Authors 2023). Additionally, the narrative structure of the play could be a confound as a large part of

299 practice time (8 minutes) and re-enters when the finalized play is staged (4 minutes). Next, the third  
 300 phase consists of a **role interview**: after the performance of each play, the researcher (interviewer) asks  
 301 the respondents (interviewees, still in character) some additional questions using a digital hand  
 302 microphone. For instance, the question, “What just happened to you, gamer Sarah?” can be answered  
 303 by a respondent, in a gamer character: “We lost the game. My teammates were all dead”. This role  
 304 interview proved to be crucial for two reasons: first, to collect additional data in the event of short(er)  
 305 plays; and second, to ask clarification questions on the storyline, as not all plots were easy to follow.  
 306 Finally, approximately halfway through the roleplay elicitation, we included a **break**. Aside from  
 307 allowing participants some time to relax, that break ensured the collection of spontaneous speech which  
 308 could be used as a benchmark for the ‘real me’ (cf. Sharma, 2018). Chronologically, the break took  
 309 place after the performance of *farmer* (second role) and lasted 15 minutes. The total duration of the  
 310 session thus amounted to 90 minutes.

311 Data collection was conducted in June 2021 and supervised by a 23-year-old female researcher who  
 312 already knew the respondents from a previous study. The respondents participated in the session prior  
 313 to hockey practice in a room with five chairs (cf. Figure 2). Each participant was wired with an  
 314 individual Lavalier microphone with two fixed cameras continuously filming. During the role  
 315 performance, the researcher provided the instruction sheet and was alternately present in the room (viz.  
 316 she left the room for the practice rounds). This roleplay elicitation protocol resulted in a corpus of 3256  
 317 respondent utterances, all of which were transcribed using the CHAT conventions of the CHILDES  
 318 project (MacWhinney, 2000).



**Figure 2:** respondents performing *gamer* (including pseudonymized names, and age in [years; months])

319 **3.3 Roleplay identification**

320 When the roleplay data is collected and transcribed, a next step concerns the identification of roleplay  
 321 utterances in the dataset. As described in Section 1.1, this procedure needs to account for the different  
 322 stages of roleplay such as ‘entering into play’, ‘negotiating the play’ and ‘performing the play’. The  
 323 first two usually incite meta-comments (“Let’s start now!” ; “No, I was gonna be the director!”), while  
 324 the latter mostly steers towards actual roleplay dialogues (“You are such a nasty gamer”). This

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swearwords in Belgian Dutch, typically occurring in plays where something goes wrong or that present a problem that needs solving, are of English origin.

325 introduces a gray zone between what is and is not considered roleplay. When aiming to establish the  
 326 link between the use of a certain linguistic variable and the role performed, empirical parameters need  
 327 to be identified and described that allow an operationalization of the difference between roleplay and  
 328 non-roleplay utterances. Since hitherto no general roleplay identification practice exists, we  
 329 synthesized the cues from previous work on roleplay both within and outside of (developmental)  
 330 sociolinguistics, and designed a unified algorithm to accommodate to this need.

331 Figure 3 presents the three-tiered roleplay identification algorithm we developed, with Supplement 2  
 332 including the complete manual. The general aim of this algorithm is to distinguish in-character speech  
 333 from all other discourse. To this end, a first step checks for the presence of a first person non-  
 334 conditional narrative cue<sup>6</sup> (Auwarter, 1986). Only utterances produced in a first person narrative,  
 335 without the presence of conditionals are retained as roleplay utterances: compare the excluded example  
 336 (a) and the retained example (b).

- 337 (a) As a farmer I would like cows.
- 338 (b) I like my cows.
- 339 (c) I'm going to start!
- 340 (d) Finished!
- 341 (e) I own a tractor.
- 342 (f) I am a teacher and I wear a red clown's nose, no just joking.
- 343 (g) I am a gamer.
- 344 (h) So what should I say again?
- 345 (i) This is supposed to be a chair.

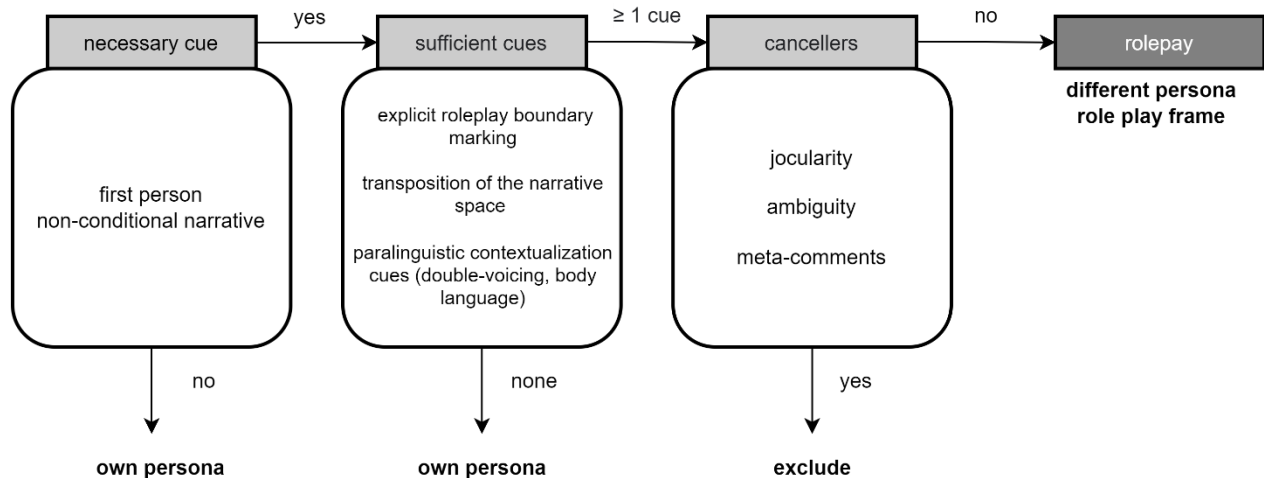


Figure 3: roleplay identification algorithm

346 Second, for the utterance to continue through the algorithm, at least one extra cue needs to be present.  
 347 This can either be (1) explicit roleplay boundary marking (utterances situated in between cues, e.g.  
 348 example (c) and (d); Garvey and Kramer, 1989); (2) transposition of the narrative space (Auwarter,

<sup>6</sup> Just like the concept is used in narratology, a ‘first person narrative’ refers to the ‘storyteller’ talking from a personal point of view (e.g. ‘catch the cow’), contrary to e.g. an omniscient narrative (viz. ‘and the farmer yelled to catch the cow’). Thus, note that a first-person narrative not necessarily indicates the word ‘I’ must figure in the utterance.

1986; Strand, 2022, the content of the utterance deviates from the respondent's life e.g. example (e)) or (3) paralinguistic contextualization cues such as alterations in body language or double-voicing, viz. changing one's voice in terms of pitch, volume and/or pace (Corsaro, 1979; Kleemann, 2012). Third, the utterance can definitively be labeled as roleplay only if no cancellers are present. These cancellers can take the form of a jocular frame (e.g. example (f)), ambiguity in the interpretation (example (g): the respondent or the respondent in character?) or meta-comments (e.g. examples (h) and (i)).

*Application.* We applied the algorithm to our roleplay data, which allowed us to sort the utterances ( $N=3256$ ) into three categories: spontaneous speech collected during the break ( $N=643$ , serving as a benchmark, e.g. example (j)), roleplay utterances ( $N=918$ , e.g. example (k)), and non-roleplay utterances ( $N=1695$ , noise, e.g. example (l)). The latter were disregarded for the analysis, leading to a total of  $N=1561$  utterances for further investigation. The distribution of these utterances among participants and among roles can be consulted in the overview table in Appendix 1. The interrater reliability ( $N=2$  raters) of the algorithm on our data, based on a rating of 1000 test utterances was high ( $\kappa: 0.92$ ). Therefore, we consider the algorithm to be reliable.

- (j) I fell off my pony this weekend.
- (k) I am the fastest soccer player of the team.
- (l) Let's pretend the goal is between those chairs.

### 3.4 Isolation of the linguistic variable

After the labeling of roleplay utterances, a second identification task consists of tagging occurrences of the linguistic variable in the data. It is, again, crucial to complete this step using an approach that can be straightforwardly replicated. The practical implementation of such an approach is highly dependent on the variation pattern under scrutiny (see Wolfram, 1991 for a Labovian approach to the linguistic variable). Therefore, we immediately turn to our case study on English insertions in Belgian Dutch.

*Application.* In order to identify English elements in our data set, we relied on two parameters that can be expected to impact the use of English, viz. 'recognizability' and 'avoidability' (see Authors, 2022: 6 for a detailed description). Specifically, we only retained recognizable avoidable English (RAE) words (e.g. *happy*, *cornflakes*); meaning we excluded those words whose English origin is unrecognizable in Dutch spelling and pronunciation (e.g. *sport*, *film*; cf. Geeraerts and Grondelaers, 2000 and Onysko, 2007) and those words that have no Dutch counterpart(s) and thus cannot be avoided (e.g. *computer*). We further excluded all English words that were primed in the instructions of the roleplay elicitation (e.g. *gamer*). In the analysis, we focus on the utterance level, distinguishing utterances with minimally one recognizable avoidable English (RAE) word ( $N=223$ ) from utterances containing no RAE words ( $N=1338$ ).

### 3.5 Cross-verifying the results

Once roleplay utterances are singled out and occurrences of the linguistic variable are tagged, the data can be analyzed with regard to the research question. As it is rather complex to implement a research design with (young) children, the interpretation and reliability of the collected roleplay data can benefit from post-testing or comparing. In this respect, cross-verification with a different type of data (e.g. the memory game in Kaiser, 2022, see Section 1.1) or with the same data are sound options.

*Application.* We applied two post-tests (A and B), each cross-verifying the data in a different way. First, in post-test A, we asked the same respondents to complete the sociolinguistic expectation survey described in Authors 2023 (see Section 3.1). Implementing a child-friendly think-aloud approach, the

392 respondents rated how often they think the roles they performed (*rappers, soccer players, gamers,*  
393 *prime ministers* and *farmers*) use English words in Dutch. To verify whether children had correctly  
394 understood the task, the researcher asked clarifying questions for each rating. Second, post-test B  
395 consisted of an individual metalinguistic interview. Three months after the roleplay task, the researcher  
396 visited each respondent in their home. During this interview, the respondent was first invited to reflect  
397 on the changes to their language use when performing the roles. Second, after being informed of the  
398 research object (i.e. the use of English in Dutch), the respondent was asked the target question: “Do  
399 rappers/farmers/gamers... use English words in Dutch?”. Since these questions are fairly difficult for  
400 children to understand, they were first asked in a yes-no format: respondents could indicate their answer  
401 showing a green (yes) or red (no) card after which the researcher asked to elaborate on the answer.  
402 Since post-test A required full disclosure as well, we conducted it after post-test B.

403 In addition to the post-tests, we also performed qualitative analysis, investigating the roleplay dialogues  
404 in further detail. To this end, we took an in-depth perspective on the individual performances and story  
405 lines, with a focus on the type of English elements that emerged in the roleplay discourse.

## 406 **4 Results**

407 Our first aim was to create a unified protocol for linguistic research on roleplay (see Section 3). This  
408 protocol sets us up for a first small-scaled case study on English insertions in Belgian Dutch, which  
409 constitutes the second aim of this paper. In Section 4.1, we provide a detailed analysis of the  
410 sociolinguistic expectations the respondents hold on English use for particular social roles (*gamer,*  
411 *soccer player, rapper, prime minister* and *farmer*). Section 4.2, then, focuses on cross-verification of  
412 the findings presented in Section 4.1. All analyses were performed in R, where we implemented the  
413 ‘ggplot2’, ‘party’, ‘partykit’ and ‘ggparty’ packages.

### 414 **4.1 Sociolinguistic expectations on English insertions captured in roleplay**

415 With the adult expectations in mind (see Authors, 2023, Section 3.1), and compared to the benchmark  
416 of spontaneous speech, we expect to find an increase of English words in the respondents’  
417 performances of English-prone roles (*gamer, rapper, soccer player*) and a decrease of English words  
418 in their performance of Dutch-prone roles (*farmer, prime minister*). To verify whether this holds true,  
419 we rely on a conditional inference tree. This statistic technique is based on binary recursive splitting  
420 which makes it capable of dealing with data sparseness. Moreover, it still reaches significance with  
421 limited respondent samples (see Tagliamonte and Baayen, 2012, for a detailed account). The results  
422 for the conditional inference tree predicting the binary use of English insertions (YES ‘dark gray’–NO  
423 ‘light gray’) are visualized in Figure 4. We coded for two parameters: role (with levels: *gamer, farmer,*  
424 *rapper, soccer player, prime minister* and the *benchmark of spontaneous speech*) and individual  
425 respondent, with the minimum criterion of  $p < 0.01$ . The inference tree has a sufficiently high  
426 predictive power of 87% (baseline 50%) and presents a C-value of 0.75.

427 The tree retained both parameters (‘role’ and ‘respondent’) with ‘role’ being the most important  
428 predictor, portraying a threefold split. A first split separates most English-prone *rapper* from all other  
429 roles ( $p < 0.001$ ), followed by a second one, isolating *soccer player* as English prone as well ( $p < 0.001$ ).  
430 A third split, lastly, groups *farmer, prime minister* and *gamer* as roles with the lowest probability of  
431 English use, which leaves the benchmark as an ‘in between’ case ( $p = 0.002$ ). If we zoom in on *rapper*,  
432 we notice that the likelihood of English use is respondent dependent: Camille inserts significantly more  
433 English elements than the other girls ( $p = 0.01$ ).

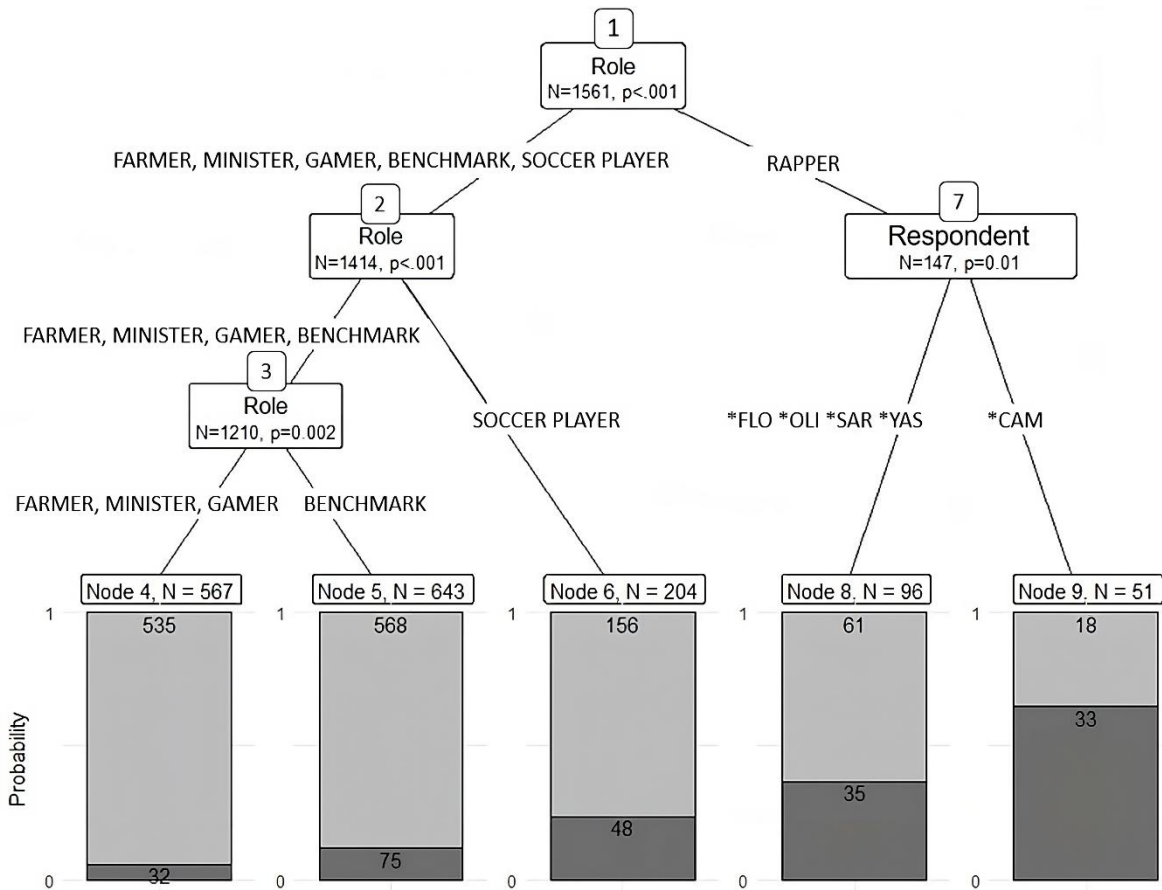


Figure 4: Conditional inference tree for English use

434 From this, we conclude (1) we captured adultlike sociolinguistic expectations on English use in the  
 435 girls’ performances, with *rapper* and *soccer player* portrayed as English-prone roles and *farmer* and  
 436 *prime minister* as Dutch-prone roles. This (2) holds true for all respondents, with Camille behaving  
 437 like an outlier for the rapper role. However, (3) there is one exception: *gamer* is unexpectedly  
 438 performed as a Dutch-prone role. In order to understand why this is the case, we turn to our post-tests.

#### 439 4.2 Cross-verifying the expectations

440 In this section, we report on the results of the post-tests (A and B) we conducted, as well as on the  
 441 qualitative analysis of the roleplay dialogues (cf. Section 3.5). As a full report takes us too far, we draw  
 442 from and present specific elements of each of those tests in order to cross-verify the expectations on  
 443 English-oriented vs. Dutch-oriented roles we observed in the performances (Section 4.2.1), and to  
 444 account for the divergent results for *gamer* (surprisingly few English words) and *rapper* (surprisingly  
 445 many English words, Section 4.2.2).

##### 446 4.2.1 Reviewing the expectations

447 Table 3 presents the results of post-test A (sociolinguistic expectation survey) for our 5 respondents.  
 448 Their ratings of expected English use for the targeted social roles are portrayed on a 7-point Likert  
 449 scale, with 1 standing for ‘never uses English in Dutch’ and 7 for ‘inserts English elements all the  
 450 time’. Ratings that do not match the expectations are marked in gray. *Gamer* aside (see Section 4.2.2)  
 451 and a few deviant responses notwithstanding (e.g. Sarah’s and Yasmine’s high ratings for *farmer* and

452 *prime minister*<sup>7</sup>), the ratings correspond to the pattern we found in the performances with *farmer* and  
 453 *prime minister* being labeled as rather Dutch prone (low ratings) and *soccer player* and *rapper* being  
 454 labeled as rather English prone (moderate to high ratings).

455 **Table 3:** Post-test A – answers to the Likert question (see Table 2), with deviant ratings highlighted in gray

respondent	Dutch-prone roles		English-prone roles		
	farmer	prime minister	gamer	soccer player	rapper
Yasmine	3	5	6	6	6
Floor	2	1	6	5	6
Camille	3	2	7	3	7
Sarah	5	2	7	5	7
Olivia	1	2	7	3	7

456 Next, in post-test B (metalinguistic interview) we checked if the respondents can verbally reflect on  
 457 the sociolinguistic expectations they hold towards the roles performed. Consider Excerpts (1) and (2)  
 458 on this account. In Excerpt (1), Floor comments on English words already in the first, unprompted  
 459 phase of the interview, contrasting vloggers’ and rappers’ English use to news readers’ and teachers’  
 460 responsibility to speak ‘nice Dutch’. Excerpt (2) shows Camille’s level of awareness when she links  
 461 gamers to street language and names the English insertion ‘show’ (viz. *cool*) as an example feature.

- 462 (1) \*INT: en waarom (.) waarom waren die [rollen] gemakkelijk?  
 463 %eng: *and why were these [roles] easy?*  
 464 \*FLO: omda(t) ja nieuwslezer en (.) &-euh een leerkracht die moeten ja die zijn verplicht om  
 465 mooi Nederlands te spreken.  
 466 %eng: *because yes newsreader and (.) &-uh a teacher they should yes they are required to*  
 467 *speak nice Dutch.*  
 468 \*FLO: terwijl da(t) vloggers rappers en &-eumh (...) gamers &-euh vaak Engelse woorden  
 469 gebruiken.  
 470 %eng: *while vloggers rappers and &-umh (...) gamers &-uh often use English words.*  
 471  
 472 (2) \*INT: ma(ar) zo zou je iets aan je taal veranderd hebben terwijl da(t) je die rollen hebt gedaan  
 473 ofzo?  
 474 %eng: *but like could you have changed something about your language while performing those roles*  
 475 *or something?*  
 476 \*CAM: ja gelijk bij zo als ik zo een boerin zou moeten spelen zou ik zo iets boertigere taal spreken.  
 477 %eng: *yes like so if I had to play farmer, I would speak in a more rustic way.*  
 478 \*CAM: of zo bijvoorbeeld bij gamers ja da(t) zijn meestal jongeren dus die zijn die hebben ook meestal  
 479 een iets ja straattaalachtigets.  
 480 %eng: *so for example with gamers, yes they are usually young people, so they also usually have*  
 481 *something like street language-ish.*  
 482 [...]  
 483 \*CAM: &-eumh vree **show** &=laughs.  
 484 %eng: &-umh how show &=laughs.

<sup>7</sup> Both girls nuanced their ratings during the think-aloud approach. Sarah mentioned that her high rating does not go for farmers living far from the city, while Yasmine added that only prime ministers who need English to communicate with foreign officials, will let some English words slip into their Dutch.



485 Following the results of post-tests A and B, it seems likely the respondents indeed performed their  
 486 sociolinguistic expectations on English use in our roleplay design. However, the gamer role proved to  
 487 be an exception (see Section 4.2.2).

#### 488 4.2.2 Closer inspection of ‘gamer’ and ‘rapper’

489 As mentioned above, the respondents’ performance of *gamer* (low English use) is confusing: all report  
 490 *gamer* to have a clear orientation towards English, both in the post-test A (ratings of 6 and 7) and B  
 491 (overt reflection about *gamers* and English use). We provide three possible accounts for this finding.  
 492 A first account can be found in the order of the roles in the performance protocol: *gamer* being the first  
 493 role, the respondents might have felt uncomfortable still and needed some time to adjust. A second  
 494 explanation then relates to the subject of the gamer play. Closer qualitative inspection on this play  
 495 shows that, instead of the provided subject of ‘a new game’ the girls mainly highlighted food in their  
 496 storyline (viz. one gamer went to buy crisps but did not come back in time for the game). This food  
 497 subject could potentially have inhibited the use of English as, compared to IT-related topics, there is  
 498 less evidence it is English prone. A third and last possible account can be found in the girls’ lack of  
 499 affiliation with the role of gamer. In a sociolinguistic interview for a previous study (cf. Authors, 2022:  
 500 10), the girls mentioned that gaming is for ‘boys’ and that, if they played a game, it would never be  
 501 ‘seriously gaming’. Since this ‘gamer role’ is considered as ‘not cool’ in their ingroup, the respondents  
 502 possibly felt reluctant to play this role, which could have resulted in fewer English insertions in their  
 503 performance. We, however, did not find additional evidence of this interpretation in the post-tests.

504 Turning to *rapper*, to uncover why it stands out as highly English prone (see Section 4.1), particularly  
 505 for outlier Camille, we took a closer though limited qualitative look at her performances. Specifically,  
 506 we investigated all English insertions she links with the role of *rapper*. In the 33 rapper utterances she  
 507 produced English in, we identified 52 English tokens and 15 English types, corresponding to a low  
 508 type-token ratio of approximately 3/10 (cf. this type-token ratio is 5/10 for Floor and Yasmine, 6/10  
 509 for Sarah and 8/10 for Olivia). Zooming in on the most frequent types, we identify *peace* ( $N=18$ ),  
 510 *dude* ( $N=7$ ), *man* ( $N=6$ , English pronunciation) and *let’s go* ( $N=6$ ). Excerpt (3) illustrates how Camille  
 511 inserts these English words, when she impersonates a peaceful rapper, a member of a band that is  
 512 having a fight about two trophies.

513 (3) \*CAM: **peace in the world** (.) **man** [% ENG PRON] (.) **dude**.  
 514 %eng: *peace in the world* (.) *man* (.) *dude*.  
 515 \*CAM: **peace peace**.  
 516 %eng: *peace peace*.  
 517 \*CAM: we gaan hier nie(t) om vechten.  
 518 %eng: *we are not going to fight about this*  
 519 \*CAM: we zullen ze [=trofeeën] delen want er zijn er toch twee.  
 520 %eng: *we will share them [=trophies]because there are two of them anyway*  
 521 \*CAM: **yeah** [% ENG PRON].  
 522 %eng: *yeah*.

523 This excerpt nuances Camille’s elevated frequency of utterances containing English words (65%) for  
 524 *rapper*: she repeats the same insertions over and over again, also in the moments preceding and ensuing  
 525 Excerpt (3): *peace in the world*, *man*, *yeah*, *peace*, later *let’s go* and *dude*. As such, these words likely  
 526 qualify as shibboleths (Kristiansen, 2003: 78): Camille seems to consider *peace*, *man*, *dude* and *let’s*  
 527 *go* as a shortcut to the identity of the ‘rapper role’. In this light, we forward the hypothesis that a smaller  
 528 type-token ratio, with specific linguistic forms being frequently inserted in a role performance of a  
 529 specific respondent, points towards more deeply rooted sociolinguistic expectations for that role and



530 for that respondent. Conversely, an alternative hypothesis is that Camille only has a limited linguistic  
531 repertoire of English words to tap into, causing her to resort to more stereotypical utterances. Further  
532 analysis is required to confirm which hypothesis is correct.

## 533 5 Discussion and conclusion

534 Building on a wide variety of methodological approaches for roleplay research in previous  
535 (developmental) (socio)linguistic studies, this paper presents a unified roleplay protocol with guiding  
536 principles for the five key steps in roleplay design and analysis (cf. Aim 1). This protocol was applied  
537 to a first small-scaled case study on preadolescents' use of English insertions in Belgian Dutch (cf.  
538 Aim 2). We found clear sociolinguistic expectations on English use by particular roles, as evidenced  
539 by children inserting more English elements in their performances of *rapper* and *soccer player* than in  
540 those of *prime minister*, *gamer* and *farmer*. What is more, this division into English- vs. Dutch-oriented  
541 roles is found for all five respondents, and appears to be confirmed through multiple post-tests. Despite  
542 this clear pattern, we identify two outliers in our results: (1) *gamer* is unexpectedly performed as a  
543 Dutch-oriented role; and (2) *rapper*, conversely, provokes a strikingly high number of English  
544 insertions.

545 All in all, it should be noted this study's empirical findings are restricted to 5 preadolescent girls'  
546 roleplay activities observed in one measuring point. In addition, we are dealing with a labor intensive  
547 design in which the number of roleplay utterances is limited compared to the total number of utterances  
548 in the data set (see also Section 3.3; cf. Appendix 1), leading to data sparseness for specific roles and  
549 respondents. Although the conditional inference tree (see Section 4.1) is able to deal with these  
550 limitations, the results should not be overstated (see Gries, 2020 for an account of interpretability and  
551 accuracy issues). Therefore, we see the case study presented in this paper as a first indication of the  
552 value of the roleplay protocol and we propose future work to expand on multiple angles. For instance,  
553 more research is needed to investigate how younger children respond to the protocol and conversely,  
554 how it could be implemented with adults. In addition, the application can be extended to a variety of  
555 linguistic variables and settings (including online roleplaying); and the impact of peer group priming  
556 (viz. respondents influencing each other's language use in group settings) deserves further scrutiny.

557 Nevertheless, the findings of this study yield three principal insights. First, it appears roleplay research  
558 is a suitable instrument to measure children's expectations towards individual social roles. Not only do  
559 the girls in our sample differentiate between their own language use and the roleplay setting, they also  
560 shift between roles, portraying notable differences of English use in performances of e.g. *soccer player*  
561 (high English use) and *farmer* (low English use). This is different from what has been observed in most  
562 roleplay elicitation studies with a focus on standard and vernacular variation (Katerbow, 2013; Kaiser,  
563 2022, see Section 1.1). In those studies, children seem to increase standard forms for all roles to the  
564 same extent, potentially suggesting a roleplay setting invites standard language use in general. Tuning  
565 in with Andersen (1990: 56), this paper demonstrates that for specific linguistic variables and with a  
566 firmly justified role selection, it is possible to go beyond the roleplay versus natural register and also  
567 capture between-role differences in children's language use during roleplay. The opportunity to explore  
568 that language use is, furthermore, the very thing that distinguishes roleplay from other methods in the  
569 field. Roleplay dialogues allow to investigate which linguistic features surface in children's minds as  
570 salient when envisaging a certain social role (see also Excerpt (3), Section 4.2.2). Examining what  
571 exactly respondents change about their language use and which strategies are used to accomplish this,  
572 brings a unique perspective to the study of sociolinguistic expectations.

573 Second, post-tests provide clear added value to interpret roleplay dialogues. This is illustrated by the  
574 two deviant patterns we observe in our data, i.e. the roles *gamer* and *rapper*. For the former, while  
575 respondents do not perform the community expectation in their roleplay (viz. using unexpectedly few  
576 utterances containing English words), the post-tests suggest they have developed that expectation (they  
577 rate and reflect on *gamer* as an English-prone role). The post-tests further provided three possible  
578 explanations for this finding, viz. nervousness for the first role, topic deviation and personal dislike of  
579 the *gamer* role. Moreover, for the aberrant pattern of *rapper* for Camille, the post-tests pointed towards  
580 a low type-token ratio of English words. However, for this role, we only performed closer scrutiny on  
581 Camille's utterances. In future studies, we therefore see potential to adopt a more qualitative  
582 perspective to the data and to expand the analysis to the other respondents.

583 Third, it turns out the five preadolescent respondents in the sample have fully developed the community  
584 expectations on English use by particular social roles. These findings tune in with previous research in  
585 developmental sociolinguistics, as these 11- to 13-year-old girls are in the final stages of  
586 preadolescence where a considerable amount of socially-meaningful variation patterns is assumed to  
587 be acquired (Nardy et al., 2013). This is further supported by the attractiveness of English as a youth  
588 language marker (see Section 1.2), which the girls must have learned to relate to at this point in their  
589 development on the verge of teenagerhood. To further document children's sociolinguistic  
590 expectations on English use, we suggest future studies investigate the relationship between English  
591 topic- or domain-specific vocabulary (e.g. *gamer* terminology like *console* or *noob*) and English youth  
592 language markers (e.g. *crazy*, *oh my god*) for the individual roles.

593 To conclude, this study pushes the field of (developmental) (socio)linguistics forward by providing a  
594 unified protocol to design and analyze roleplay research targeting sociolinguistic expectations. The  
595 synthesis of the diverse methodological approaches allows for transparency and provides more ground  
596 for replication studies, fostering the potential of roleplay for future linguistic inquiry.

## 597 **SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL**

598 The supplementary material for this paper can be consulted through this link:  
599 [https://osf.io/vykb4/?view\\_only=5c7afc806fb34cd79f8d02d569e142e9](https://osf.io/vykb4/?view_only=5c7afc806fb34cd79f8d02d569e142e9)

## 600 **DATA AVAILABILITY**

601 The data sets presented in this article are not readily available because of ethical restrictions that could  
602 comprise the privacy of the participants.

## 603 **ETHICS STATEMENT**

604 This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee at [ANONYMIZED UNIVERSITY],  
605 approval number X-XXX-XXXX-XX. The participants provided assent to participate in the study and  
606 were unaware of the research object. Parents gave written informed consent and were given full  
607 disclosure.

608 **AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION**

609 **Corresponding author:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources,  
 610 Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization, Project administration. **Second author:**  
 611 Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision. **Third author:**  
 612 Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

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712 7 Appendix 1  
713

	Absolute number of utterances			Percentage of utterances with English insertions	
	without English insertions	with English insertions	total		
benchmark spontaneous speech	568	75	643	11.66	Mean_ benchmark 11.66%
*YAS	84	4	88	4,55	
*FLO	69	6	75	8,00	
*CAM	143	27	170	15,88	
*SAR	121	11	132	8,33	
*OLI	151	27	178	15,17	
<b>English-prone roles</b>					
gamer	148	12	160	7.50	Mean_ENG prone 25.05% (M of 3 M)
*YAS	13	1	14	7,14	
*FLO	14	0	14	0,00	
*CAM	55	6	61	9,84	
*SAR	21	2	23	8,70	
*OLI	45	3	48	6,25	
soccer player	156	48	204	23.53	
*YAS	10	7	17	41,18	
*FLO	16	3	19	15,79	
*CAM	40	16	56	28,57	
*SAR	31	8	39	20,51	
*OLI	59	14	73	19,18	
rapper	79	68	147	46.26	
*YAS	10	5	15	33,33	
*FLO	11	8	19	42,11	
*CAM	18	33	51	64,71	
*SAR	15	13	28	46,43	
*OLI	25	9	34	26,47	
<b>Dutch-prone roles</b>					
farmer	248	9	257	3.50	Mean_DU prone 4.91% (M of 2 M)
*YAS	29	0	29	0,00	
*FLO	47	1	48	2,08	
*CAM	60	5	65	7,69	
*SAR	41	1	42	2,38	
*OLI	71	2	73	2,74	
prime minister	139	11	150	7.33	
*YAS	12	3	15	20,00	
*FLO	16	1	17	5,88	
*CAM	41	7	48	14,58	
*SAR	11	0	11	0,00	
*OLI	59	0	59	0,00	