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Individual differences in children's private speech: The role of imaginary companions



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ABSTRACT

Relations between children's imaginary companion status and their engagement in private speech during free play were investigated in a socially diverse sample of 5-year-olds ($N = 148$). Controlling for socioeconomic status, receptive verbal ability, total number of utterances, and duration of observation, there was a main effect of imaginary companion status on type of private speech. Children who had imaginary companions were more likely to engage in covert private speech compared with their peers who did not have imaginary companions. These results suggest that the private speech of children with imaginary companions is more internalized than that of their peers who do not have imaginary companions and that social engagement with imaginary beings may fulfill a similar role to social engagement with real-life partners in the developmental progression of private speech.

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Introduction

Modern research on the developmental progression of children's private speech (e.g., [Berk & Garvin, 1984](#); [Diaz & Berk, 1992](#); [Winsler & Naglieri, 2003](#)) supports [Vygotsky's \(1934/1987\)](#) contention that this form of self-talk is gradually internalized during early childhood and transformed into inner speech or verbalized thought. Indeed, the degree of internalization of private speech has been formalized into a three-level coding scheme ([Berk, 1986](#)), from task-irrelevant speech (Level 1) through self-guiding, task-relevant comments (Level 2) to covert whispering and verbal lip

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movements (Level 3). The incidence of overt private speech peaks between 3 and 7 years of age (Berk, 1992; Kohlberg, Yaeger, & Hjertholm, 1968), a time when children frequently talk out loud to themselves while engaged in a range of activities. As children get older, their private speech becomes increasingly more difficult to understand because it is both quieter (whispering and muttering) and more abbreviated and condensed (occasional words rather than complete sentences). Kohlberg and colleagues (1968) reported that children continue to use this covert private speech well into middle childhood, and more recent research has shown that private speech endures as a means of regulating cognitive performance even during adulthood (Duncan & Cheyne, 1999, 2002).

Children's use of private speech has been shown to be positively associated with their performance on a range of cognitive tasks, including planning (Fernyhough & Fradley, 2005) and puzzle solving (Winsler, Diaz, McCarthy, Atencio, & Adams Chabay, 1999). More striking evidence for the role of private speech in children's concurrent cognitive performance comes from the finding that preventing children from engaging in its use (via articulatory suppression) during the planning phase of an executive function task results in impaired performance (Lidstone, Meins, & Fernyhough, 2010). In addition to its facilitation of concurrent cognitive performance, children's tendency to engage in private speech during executive planning tasks is also positively associated with their engagement in phonological recoding strategies during a working memory task (Al-Namlah, Fernyhough, & Meins, 2006) and with the richness with which they recall autobiographical memories (Al-Namlah, Meins, & Fernyhough, 2012). Moreover, children's use of private speech shows consistency across different tasks and contexts (Lidstone, Meins, & Fernyhough, 2011; Winsler, De León, Wallace, Carlton, & Willson-Quayle, 2003), suggesting that internalization of private speech may represent a domain-general shift in children's ability verbally to mediate their behavior (Fernyhough, 2008).

Private speech appears to be a universal feature of childhood. For example, there is evidence that developmental disorders such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; Berk & Landau, 1993; Berk & Potts, 1991; Winsler, Manfra, & Diaz, 2007) and even specific language impairment (Lidstone, Meins, & Fernyhough, 2012) merely delay the internalization of private speech rather than prevent children from using such speech to regulate their behavior. But despite this evidence for the universality of private speech, there are individual differences in its use at any given age. Such differences highlight the potential impact of children's social environment on the development of private speech. For example, more advanced private speech has been found to be associated with an authoritative parenting style (Behrend & Rosengren, 1992; Winsler, Feder, Way, & Manfra, 2006) and higher socioeconomic status (Berk & Garvin, 1984). Conversely, delays in private speech development have been reported in children whose early social experiences have been restricted. Children brought up in low-income Appalachian families, a culture where adult-child verbal communication is limited, show delays in private speech (Berk & Garvin, 1984), as do children from low-income families with a history of abuse (Diaz, Neal, & Vachio, 1991). Consistent with Vygotsky's (1934/1987) contention that private speech has its origins in early social dialogue, these individual differences in private speech have been interpreted with reference to the differing levels of engagement in adult-child social exchange afforded by these wide-ranging family contexts.

In contrast to this broad literature on social-environmental influences on private speech, little attention has been given to the potential role of child-centered social engagement characteristics. The current study is the first to investigate whether children's imaginary social interaction fulfills a similar role to social engagement with real-life partners in the developmental progression of private speech. Specifically, we focused on whether children's creation of imaginary companions is related to the sophistication and content of their private speech. Svendsen (1934) defined an imaginary companion as "an invisible character named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child, but no apparent objective basis" (p. 988). This definition has endured, but modern research has also included imaginary beings that are embodied in a toy or an object (so-called personified objects) within the category of imaginary companions. Prevalence rates of having an imaginary companion at some point during childhood range from 10% (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999) to 65% (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004), with typical rates around 20% to 50% (Fernyhough, Bland, Meins, & Coltheart, 2007; Gleason, 2005; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006).

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