

The effect of amount and timing of bilingual exposure on French grammatical acquisition

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Numerous studies have demonstrated that vocabulary acquisition is strongly impacted by the amount of language input available to the child, both in monolingual (Huttenlocher et al. 1991, Hart & Risley, 1995) and bilingual children (e.g. Pearson et al., 1997). There has been more debate over the extent to which grammatical development is dependent on input (e.g. Bhatia & Ritchie, 1999). In two recent studies (Author, 2011; 2015), we documented the vocabulary as well as morphosyntactic development of a large group (n=139) of bilingual preschool children (age 3 years and 5 years) acquiring French and English simultaneously. Within each age group, children were equivalent in age, nonverbal cognition and socioeconomic status (SES), but varied widely in the relative amount of exposure to French versus English since birth – thus the study covered French monolinguals, English monolinguals and bilinguals who were more dominant in French, more dominant in English, or approximately balanced. To examine morphosyntactic development, spontaneous language samples were collected in both languages for each child. Results showed that amount of exposure exerts a comparably strong influence on both vocabulary and morphosyntactic development. Morphosyntactic development followed a highly language-specific pattern in each language. At the group level and for individual children, grammatical morphology was more diverse and produced far more accurately than in English samples. Error types also followed a language-specific pattern: English samples were characterized by an Optional Infinitive pattern, whereas errors were overall much fewer in French samples and involved predominantly gender marking, whereas verb inflection errors were very few. Children age 5 years who had received much less exposure to English than French evidenced an Extended Optional Infinitive pattern in their English, which is characteristic of Specific Language Impairment when found in monolingual English speakers in this age range. At the same time, these children exhibited no such difficulty when they spoke French. These findings indicate that, in simultaneous bilingual acquisition, children who have unequal exposure to each language can, and in fact do as a rule, have unequal levels of proficiency in each language both in vocabulary and grammar. The results also suggest that grammar is as dependent on input as is vocabulary, and in fact requires language-specific input. This suggests that grammatical acquisition does not need to rely on a shared underlying set of parameters or rules.

In a follow-up study whose results will be presented, this line of research was extended to monolingual and bilingual school-age children acquiring French, and to the examination of the impact not only of the amount of language exposure, but also of its timing. This was done by including both simultaneous and sequential bilingual children. Participants include 130 children, 66 enrolled in Grade 1, and 65 enrolled in Grade 3 in French-language schools in Montreal (in total 67 simultaneous, 39 sequential, and 30 monolingual learners of French). As part of a larger protocol, spontaneous language samples were collected in French and in English (for those children whose other language is English). The language samples have been collected and transcribed and are in the process of being coded for grammatical morphology (correct and incorrect use) and syntactic complexity. In addition, information has been collected on the children's language exposure history since birth through a detailed parent report form. Results will be presented for the 1st and 3rd graders separately in terms of how grammatical development (length of utterance, diversity and accuracy of grammatical morphology, use of complex sentences) in each language relates to amount of exposure to that language, how proficiency in the two languages compares for children with having received different amounts of bilingual exposure and how simultaneous and sequential bilinguals compare to monolingual francophones. The results will permit the impact of sheer amount exposure versus its timing to be teased apart.