

Types of syntactic complexity: How typical and atypical bilinguals deal with complex structures

Due to its increasing theoretical and practical relevance, the problem of how to reliably diagnose Specific Language Impairment in multilingual settings has been intensively investigated in recent years. From the practical point of view, it is often impossible to test both languages of a child so that developing sensitive and specific tests in the ambient language is not only desirable but necessary if over- and underdiagnosis are to be avoided. From a theoretical, developmental and linguistic, point of view, it can be hypothesized that certain, computationally complex structures will be problematic for children with language impairment but not necessarily for their typical peers..

This hypothesis will be explored with respect to the production of relative clauses. Starting from cross-linguistic monolingual elicitation data and results from spontaneous speech, I will focus on new data from a sentence repetition task (SRT) administered to monolingual children and children who either acquired two languages from birth or can be classified as early L2 learners (both subsumed under the term “bilingual” here). As it turns out, monolingual and bilingual 6-to 10 year olds pattern alike in their good mastery of long passives, subject relatives and object relatives without interveners. They also pattern alike in showing difficulties with object relatives of the type “the lion who the elephant is wetting”. Monolingual and bilingual children with SLI, on the other hand, have great difficulties with all these constructions: they master neither embedding nor Wh-movement.

We can conclude that typical children acquiring a second language may have initial difficulties in dealing with their two languages, but they clearly do not show persistent problems in the computation of complex constructions. In contrast, monolingual and bilingual children with SLI perform poorly in an SRT which specifically targets such constructions. Implications for linguistic theory, the underlying deficit of SLI and the bilingual brain will be explored.