

Exploring the Vocabulary and Grammar Advantage of US American over British English Speakers at Age 2;0

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Abstract : The research aims to compare vocabulary size and grammatical development between US American English- and British English-speaking children at age 2;0. As there is evidence that precocious children with large vocabularies develop grammar skills earlier than their typically developing peers, it was investigated if this also holds true across varieties of English. Thus, if US American children start to produce words earlier than their British counterparts, this could mean that US children are also at an advantage in the early developmental stages of acquiring grammar. This research employs a British English adaptation of the MacArthur-Bates CDI Words and Sentences (Lincoln Toddler CDI) to compare vocabulary and also grammar scores with the updated US Toddler CDI norms. At first, the Lincoln TCDI was assessed for its concurrent validity with the Preschool Language Scale (PLS-5 UK). This showed high correlations for the vocabulary and grammar subscales between the tests. In addition, the frequency of the Toddler CDI's words was also compared using American and British English corpora of adult spoken and written language. A paired-samples t-test found a significant difference in word frequency between the British and the American CDI demonstrating that the TCDI's words were indeed of higher frequency in British English. We then compared language and grammar scores between US (N = 135) and British children (N = 96). A two-way between groups ANOVA examined if the two samples differed in terms of SES (i.e. maternal education) by investigating the impact of SES and country on vocabulary and sentence complexity. The two samples did not differ in terms of maternal education as the interaction effects between SES and country were not significant. In most cases, scores were not significantly different between US and British children, for example, for overall word production and most grammatical subscales (i.e. use of words, over-regularizations, complex sentences, word combinations). However, in-depth analysis showed that US children were significantly better than British children at using some noun categories (i.e. people, objects, places) and several categories marking early grammatical development (i.e. pronouns, prepositions, quantifiers, helping words). However, the effect sizes were small. Significant differences for grammar were found for irregular word forms and progressive tense suffixes. US children were more advanced in their use of these grammatical categories, but the effect sizes were small. In sum, while differences exist in terms of vocabulary and grammar ability, favouring US children, effect sizes were small. It can be concluded that most British children are 'catching up' with their US American peers at age 2;0. Implications of this research will be discussed.

Keywords : first language acquisition, grammar, parent report instrument, vocabulary

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