

Use of Pragmatic Cues for Word Learning in Bilingual and Monolingual Children

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Abstract : BACKGROUND: Children growing up in a multilingual environment face challenges related to the need to monitor the speaker's linguistic abilities, more frequent communication failures, and having to acquire a large number of words in a limited amount of time compared to monolinguals. As a result, bilingual learners may develop different word learning strategies, rely more on some strategies than others, and engage cognitive resources such as theory of mind and attention skills in different ways. HYPOTHESIS: The goal of our study is to investigate whether multilingual exposure leads to improvements in the ability to use pragmatic inference for word learning, i.e., to use speaker cues to derive their referring intentions, often by overcoming lower level salience effects. The speaker cues we identified as relevant are (a) use of a modifier with or without stress ('the WET dax' prompting the choice of the referent which has a dry counterpart), (b) referent extension ('this is a kitten with a fep' prompting the choice of the unique rather than shared object), (c) referent novelty (choosing novel action rather than novel object which has been manipulated already), (d) teacher versus random sampling (assuming the choice of specific examples for a novel word to be relevant to the extension of that new category), and finally (e) emotional affect ('look at the figoo' uttered in a sad or happy voice) . METHOD: To this end, we implemented on a touchscreen computer a task corresponding to each of the cues above, where the child had to pick the referent of a novel word. These word learning tasks (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) were adapted from previous word learning studies. 113 children have been tested (54 reception and 59 year 1, ranging from 4 to 6 years old) in a London primary school. Bilingual or monolingual status and other relevant information (age of onset, proficiency, literacy for bilinguals) is ascertained through language questionnaires from parents (34 out of 113 received to date). While we do not yet have the data that will allow us to test for effect of bilingualism, we can already see that performances are far from approaching ceiling in any of the tasks. In some cases the children's performances radically differ from adults' in a qualitative way, which means that there is scope for quantitative and qualitative effects to arise between language groups. The findings should contribute to explain the puzzling speed and efficiency that bilinguals demonstrate in acquiring competence in two languages.

Keywords : bilingualism, pragmatics, word learning, attention

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