

Unravelling the input: the effect of language exposure on the lexical development of Turkish-Dutch bilinguals and monolingual Dutch children

In this paper, we examine the early lexical development in Dutch of Turkish-Dutch successive bilinguals in an immigrant context and compare it to the lexical development of monolingual Dutch children. Early childhood bilingualism appears in different forms in relation to the age of onset or amount of language exposure (De Houwer, 2007). Research findings have shown that bilingual children's language proficiency develops in line with the amount of exposure to the languages involved (Duursma et al. 2007). Most studies are based on children raised in One Parent-One Language (OPOL) homes as the languages in focus are easier to quantify (De Houwer, 2007). Studies on the early lexical development in early immigrant bilingualism, however, are rare and, to our knowledge, our study is the first to map the semantic distribution in the Dutch lexicon of very young (17-36 months) bilingual Turkish-Dutch children through the M-CDI.

In the study, we compare the composition of Turkish-Dutch successive bilinguals' early lexicon and Dutch monolinguals based on the lexical categories in the M-CDI. A total of 90 children were involved in the study, all living in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. They were divided into three groups according to Home Language: a Monolingual Dutch Group (MonoDu, N = 36), a One Parent-One Language Group (OPOL, N = 18) and a Turkish Parents Group (TUP, N = 36). As expected, results revealed significant differences between the groups in the overall size of the productive and receptive lexicon (Kruskal-Wallis, $H=18.947$, $df=2$, $p < .05$): overall, the MonoDu Group had a larger lexicon ($M=308$, $s.d.=212$) than the OPOL Group ($M=205$, $s.d.=140$) and the TUP Group ($M=104$, $s.d.=122$), though there were important individual differences between children.

The results should not be interpreted as a deficit resulting from bilingualism, but they reveal that input quantity in the home context where two languages interact is extremely important in the composition of successive bilingual children's early lexicon, especially in immigrant families. In the analysis, we focus on the effect of Age of First Exposure to the community language, Dutch, and the semantic distribution in the productive and receptive lexicon of the children. In sum, the study shows that the size and composition of the lexicon of bilingual children from OPOL and TUP homes are considerably different from each other, showing the influence of input quantity and quality. The results will be discussed in light of the often reported underachievement of Turkish-Dutch successive bilinguals in a school context.

References

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