Referent Introduction and Maintenance in the English Narratives of Monolingual and Bilingual Children
モノリンガル児とバイリンガル児の英語ナラティヴにおける指示対象の導入と維持

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Abstract: This study examines referring expressions in the English oral narratives of Japanese-English bilingual children and whether these expressions resemble those of monolingual English peers. Stories were elicited from eight bilingual school-aged children raised in Japan, using a wordless picture book. Referential strategies used in the narratives to introduce, re-introduce, and maintain the referents in the bilingual children's English narratives were compared with those used by monolingual children. The analysis reveals similarities and differences between the two groups. The bilinguals' referential strategies to re-introduce and maintain the referents were almost identical to those of the monolingual children. However, in the referent introduction, although both groups highly preferred indefinite articles with a noun phrase (NP), bilingual children tended to use more definite articles before NPs, as compared to monolingual children. The study suggests that children growing up bilingually in the Japanese context are able to tell a story in their socially non-dominant language in a language-specific manner, but with some unique characteristics, presumably due to reduced input in the non-dominant language.

5

1. Background

1.1. Referential cohesion and referring expressions in discourse

In any stretch of discourse, a speaker needs to choose appropriate referential

forms based on the information status of a referent. In a binary distinction, a referent is considered as new or given, depending on whether it is introduced in the discourse for the first time or is previously mentioned (Chafe, 1994; Du Bois, 1987). Research that examined speakers of various languages revealed that speakers mark new information by typically using the lexical forms. On the other hand, to mark given information, speakers tend to select non-lexical forms such as pronouns or null forms (e. g. Allen, 2000; Baker & Greenfield, 1988; Clancy, 1997). Besides this language-universal tendency, a speaker also needs to follow a language-specific way of expressing referents that varies across the typology of languages, especially in expressing given referents. For example, in English and many other Indo-European languages, speakers typically use pronouns in order to refer to given referents, whereas Japanese and Korean speakers are more likely to use null forms (Serratrice, 2007; Clancy, 1997).

However, information status functions in a complex manner in the reality beyond the binary distinctions such as new versus given. Chafe (1994) proposed three-way divisions of information status based on the concept of activation: given (active), accessible (semi-active), and new (inactive). An accessible referent is also referred to as background information: It has been mentioned previously in the discourse, replaced by a new referent, but remains in the peripheral space of one's consciousness for some time (currently out of focus but still accessible) and may become activated again later in the discourse. Similar to the language-universal way of expressing information status, given referents are realized as non-lexical forms, whereas new and accessible referents are realized as lexical forms such as nouns or noun phrases. The speaker should focus on the degree of activeness of a listener's mind in order to communicate successfully. Thus, it is important for a speaker to assess the dynamics of information status from the other's viewpoint and choose a language-specifically appropriate form of referential expressions.

Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski (1993) proposed the Givenness Hierarchy, which illustrates how the use of determiners and pronouns is determined by a speaker's assessment on the cognitive status of referents in the interlocutor's mind. They proposed a hierarchy that is created based on English, but they further extended the classification to other languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. According to the model, the judgment of givenness is a gradual concept on a continuum, where "in focus of attention" (pronoun) is on the most given end, followed by "activated" (this/that/this NP), "familiar" (that NP), "uniquely identifiable" (the NP), "referential indefinite" (this N), and "type representation" (indefinite + NP) on the least given end; each status encoded into a particular type of referential device.

As is clear from these studies, speakers must choose the appropriate referential form for each particular discourse context among a variety of possible candidates based on the extent to which the information is shared among the participants. Thus, choosing appropriate referring expressions in each different context requires not only syntactic knowledge but also discourse-pragmatic competence, and the appropriate form-function mapping is indispensable for successful communication.

1.2. Referring expressions in child narrative studies

An accumulation of studies on the use and development of referential cohesion in narratives in children suggests that the acquisition of the appropriate use of referring expressions is a gradual process, and the time required to reach the adult norm depends on the function to be acquired (e.g., Hickmann, Hendriks, Roland and Liang, 1996; Kuntay, 2002; Nakamura, 1993). Cross-linguistic studies indicate that young children do not mark new information reliably until later in their development, whereas marking given information is mastered early. For example, Nakamura (1993) investigated referring expressions in Japanese children as well as adults, and reported that the linguistic device to introduce a new referent (NP followed by subject marker *ga*) did not appear constantly until around nine years of age, whereas children showed target-like use of null forms for continuous mention. Similarly, Hickmann et al (1996) studied the acquisition of English, French, German, and Mandarin Chinese among children and reported that they do not reliably supply indefinite markers when introducing a new referent in discourse until around 10 years of age; however, children were sensitive to topic maintenance from early on—definite markers and pronominal forms to maintain the topic appeared from around the age of four. Thus, acquiring the appropriate referring expressions is a challenging task for young children, especially when introducing a new referent into a discourse, whereas referent maintenance is acquired relatively at early stages of development.

1.3. Referring expressions in bilingual narratives

Children exposed to two languages from the early stages of development face the challenge of acquiring two different sets of rules of form-function mapping. Despite the significance of the research topic in understanding the language competence of bilingual populations, the use and development of referential cohesion in bilingual narratives is still under-investigated, as is the case in most areas of language development. Several researchers have investigated the referring strategies of bilingual children, mostly showing that children can use each language in language-specific ways (e.g., Minami, 2011; Saito, 2007).

Minami (2011) was one of the first to study the use of referring expressions in Japanese-English bilingual school age children's narratives. Minami collected narratives from forty 8- to 12-year-old bilingual children living in the United States using Mercer Mayer's wordless picture book "Frog, where are you?", and analyzed the referring expressions in different contexts in both languages. The analysis revealed that the children were able to use language-specific referring expressions in both Japanese and English: In Japanese, children (a) introduced referents by using a noun phrase followed by the subject particle *ga*, (b) marked a second mention of the same referent using the topic particle *wa*, (c) re-introduced a referent after its absence in the discourse by typically marking it with *ga* or by dropping it, and (d) maintained the referent by using, in most cases, null forms. On the other hand, in English, the children (a) introduced a new referent by using the indefinite article *a* followed by the noun phrase, (b) marked a second mention of the same referent

using the definite article *the*, (c) re-introduced a referent by typically marking it with *the* + NP, and (d) maintained the referent by predominantly using pronominal forms.

Minami's study successfully showed that bilingual children acquire separate referring strategies when telling stories in each language; however, the study did not describe the children's language background in detail, thereby making it difficult to judge whether the children should be considered as successive or simultaneous bilinguals. Moreover, the study did not compare the children's narratives to those of the monolingual children in each language. As Lanza (2001) argued, not only the similarities with the monolingual norm (and thus attempts to show that bilinguals are developing within a "normal" range) but also the differences as well as the unique characteristics of the bilingual narratives need to be investigated. Bilinguals are not "two monolinguals in one" (Grosjean, 1982) after all; thus, their unique features of language use need to be examined further. Therefore, studies that investigate the actual similarities and differences between monolingual and bilingual children's narratives in each language would be informative.

Several researchers conducted careful comparisons between the referring expressions of first and second language narratives. Chen and Pan (2009), for example, analyzed the English narratives of 60 Chinese-English early successive bilinguals living in the US, who acquired Chinese as their first language and were then exposed to English from around three years of age at English-speaking daycare centers. The data were then compared with the narratives of their monolingual English-speaking peers. Bilingual-monolingual differences were observed in the referential forms for character introduction as well as in the use of pronominal forms for maintenance.

Alverez (2003), Serratrice (2007), and Chen and Lei (2012), all of which used the book "Frog, where are you?" to elicit narratives, are among the few studies that analyzed simultaneous bilingual children's referring expressions in spoken narratives in both languages by making comparison with monolingual peers of each language. Alverez (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of one English-Spanish bilingual child from 6 to 11 years of age and compared the forms used for referent introduction in narratives with those of comparable monolingual studies in each language. The results revealed similarities and differences: The child's appropriateness of form for character introduction increased according to age in both languages at the same rate; however, differences were observed in the ratio of postverbal introductions in both languages. The bilingual child used more postverbal introductions in English than the monolingual peer, who generally introduced referents in the preverbal position.

Serratrice (2007) elicited narratives from 12 English-Italian 8-year-olds and compared the referring strategies with those of the monolingual peers in each language. The analysis shows that the patterns of referential choice were almost identical to those of the monolingual peers in each language, except for the excessive use of noun phrases for topic maintenance in Italian, thus suggesting the influence of English.

Chen and Lei (2012) studied 30 Chinese-English bilingual children and also reported similarities and differences in the features of bilingual children's narratives, as compared

with those of monolingual children: bilingual-monolingual comparison revealed no differences in the maintenance context, but they observed clear differences in the introduction and re-introduction contexts. When introducing a referent in English, bilingual children tended to use more definite articles before noun phrases, as compared to monolingual English speakers, thereby suggesting that bilingual children's English referential strategy differs slightly from that of the monolingual speakers in terms of how they perceive the accessibility of the referent to the listener. Bilingual children also used more NPs in re-introduction in Cantonese narratives than their monolingual counterparts; this was attributed to the influence of English.

Thus, all these studies on successive and simultaneous bilingual children's narratives found features of referring expressions that can be considered as *amalgamation* (Lanza, 2001), or convegence of strategies from both languages.

Studies on the unique characteristics of bilingual narratives have recently started, and the language combinations are still very much limited. To our knowledge, such analysis is yet to be conducted in simultaneous or early successive bilinguals acquiring Japanese and English. The current study, therefore, is an attempt to examine the similarities and differences in the referring expressions in the English narratives of Japanese-English bilingual school-age children and monolingual children.

2. Japanese and English referring expressions

Languages vary in the way they express different information status. Below, we provide a rough sketch of the basic structural features as well as the referring expressions in Japanese, and English.

Japanese is an SOV language, and NPs are followed by particles to indicate grammatical roles. To introduce a new referent, [NP + particle *ga*] is the most typical form (e.g., *"otokonoko (boy) ga"*). The particle *ga* is a subject marker, but it also functions to mark new information in the discourse (Kuno, 1973). When referring to a referent that has already been introduced in discourse, NPs are followed by the particle *wa*, which marks the topic of the utterance, thus indicating givenness (e.g., *"onokonoko (boy) wa"*). For continuous mention, ellipsis or null forms are used (Hinds, 1984): Null forms are allowed in Japanese as long as the referent is recoverable from the context (Huang, 1984; Li & Thompson, 1976).

On the other hand, English is an SVO language with fixed word order. Its phrases are prepositional: NPs are preceded by articles and other elements (prepositions and modifiers). To introduce a new referent, an NP is preceded by the indefinite article *a* (e.g., *"a boy"*). To re-introduce an already communicated referent, an NP is preceded by the definite article *the*, which marks givenness (e.g., *"the boy"*). To maintain a topic, pronouns are typically used, and null forms are, in principle, ungrammatical in English.

Japanese and English show a stark contrast in the referring expressions: Japanese distinguishes introduction and re-introduction of a topic by the use of different post-verbal particles marking subject or topic (*ga* and *wa*), whereas in English, the same difference is

marked by definiteness using preverbal articles (*a* and *the*). For topic maintenance, the null form is the norm for Japanese, whereas pronouns are the most used in English. Adapting the continuum chart in Chen and Lei (2012, p. 42), Table 1 summarizes the referring expressions in each language in different contexts with regard to information status.

Table 1. Referring expressions in Japanese and English

	most given < —————————————— > least given		
	maintenance	re-introduction	introduction
Japanese	Null	NP-*wa*	NP-*ga*
		(topic marker)	(subject marker)
	Φ	*otokonoko-wa*	*otokonoko-ga*
English	Pronoun	*the*-NP	*a*-NP
		(definite article)	(indefinite article)
	he	*the boy*	*a boy*

3. Research questions

The research questions addressed in the current study are as follows: Do the Japanese-English bilingual children's English narratives show similar patterns in terms of referent introduction and maintenance as their monolingual peers? More specifically, do the children mainly use (1) indefinite articles followed by a full noun phrase for topic introduction, (2) definite articles followed by a full noun phrase for topic re-introduction, and (3) pronouns for topic maintenance?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The current subjects comprised eight Japanese-English bilingual children living in Japan, four girls and four boys, who had acquired the two languages in a naturalistic environment and were using the two languages on a daily basis at the time of data collection. Four of them, who acquired both languages at home, were studying at schools where the medium of instruction was either English or Japanese. The other four children acquired Japanese as their home language and English as their medium of instruction in school. The age ranged from 8 to 13 years old, with 10 years old as the average. Monolingual English data were drawn from the CHILDES database "Narrative competence among monolingual and bilingual school children in Miami" (Pearson, 2002), which is a large corpus of children's narratives elicited using the wordless picture book "Frog, where are you?(Mayer, 1969). This is the same book used for the current study. Among the dataset,

nine narratives of children around the same age range (10 to 11 years old), four boys and five girls, were selected.

4.2. Data collection

The data included video- and audio-taped narratives of the participants from the same book mentioned above. This book was chosen to facilitate comparison between previous studies, as a large number of narrative elicitations have been conducted using this picture book.

The data elicitation procedure was as follows. First, each of the bilingual children was asked to glance through the storybook. They were given ample time so that they could feel comfortable in telling the story. Second, each child narrated the story to the bilingual researcher twice from beginning to end, first in English, and then in Japanese. Telling the story in the children's socially non-dominant language first would keep the influence from Japanese to English to a minimum. The current analysis used the English data.

4.3. Transcription, analysis, and coding

The recorded narratives were transcribed and coded by a bilingual researcher using the CHILDES format (MacWhinney, 2000). The analysis focused on how storytellers referred to the following characters in the subject position in English: [*a* + FNP (full noun phrase)], [*the* + FNP], [pronoun or null form (ellipsis or omission of an overt reference term)], as used in referent timing of (1) referent introduction, (2) referent re-introduction, and (3) continuous mention of the referent. We adopted the definition by Serratrice (2007) to classify referent re-introduction and referent maintenance: Referent re-introduction occurs when there is a shift of topic across two continuous clauses, whereas referent maintenance is defined as when there is no topic shift across the two clauses. Below are examples of each category from the bilingual data.

Example (1)
Kumi (bilingual, 13 years old)

There was *a boy* and *dog* and *frog*.	[introduction]
And *the frog* was in the jar.	[maintenance]
And it was night time.	
And *the boy* was looking at the frog.	[re-introduction]

We conducted a comparison between bilingual English and monolingual English data. The quantitative analysis was conducted by using CLAN (MacWhinney, 2000). Then, we calculated the ratio of each form out of all the forms coded. The ratios of the forms in English in bilinguals and monolinguals were compared for each referential function.

5. Results

5.1. Forms used to introduce a referent

We first examined whether the referent is typically represented by an [indefinite article (a/an) + FNP] when introduced for the first time in English narratives. Figure 1 presents the mean percentage of each referential expression used for reference introduction.
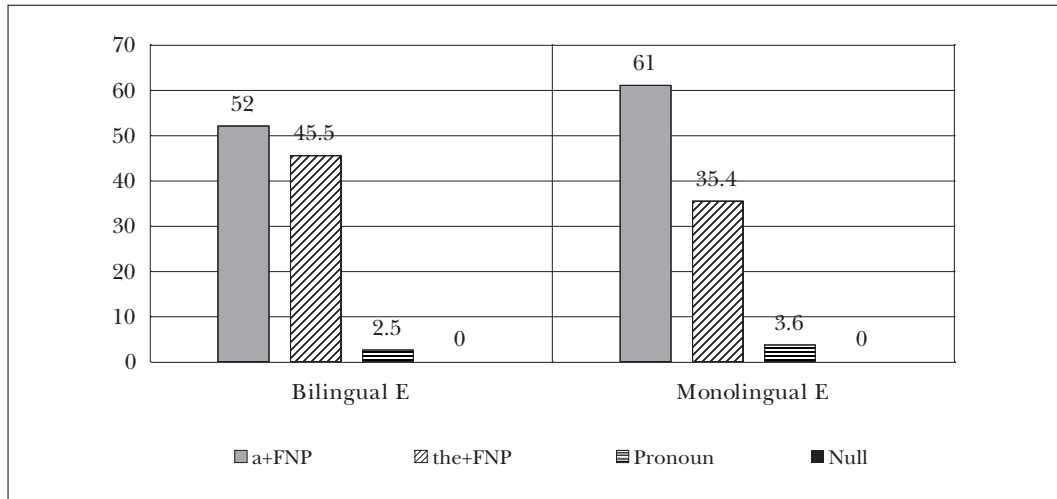

Figure 1.   The mean percentage of each referential expression used for referent introduction for each subject group

As indicated in Figure 1, both bilingual and monolingual children preferred [*a*+ FNP] to introduce a new referent in discourse (52.5%, 61.0%) the most, followed by [the + NP] (45.5%, 35.4%), and little use of pronouns (2.5%, 3.6%); however, the use of null forms was absent. Thus, our data show that bilinguals' use of referring expressions to introduce a referent in English is similar to that of their monolingual peers in terms of preferred forms. However, the data also show that bilinguals used more [the + FNP] than monolinguals (45.0% > 35.4%) for referent introduction, thereby showing a somewhat different pattern.

5.2. Forms used to re-introduce the referent

Next, we examined whether the referent is represented by [definite article *the* + FNP] when re-introducing the referent. Figure 2 summarizes the mean percentage of each forms used for referent re-introduction.

As is clear from Figure 2, both bilingual and monolingual children showed an almost identical distribution of different forms in English: There is a clear preference for [the + FNP] (68.9%, 72.2%), some use of pronouns (28.5%, 25.4%), little use of [a + FNP] (2.1%, 2.4%), and seldom used null forms.
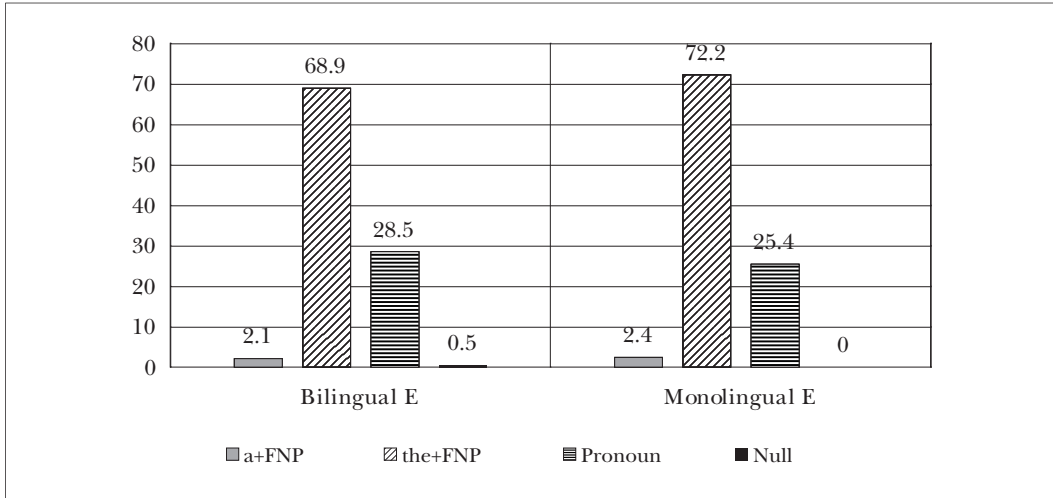
Figure 2. The mean percentage of each referential expression used for referent re-introduction for each subject group

5.3. Forms used to maintain the topic

Finally, we examined whether the referent is represented by a pronoun or reduced noun in the continuous mention. Refer to Figure 3 for the mean percentage of each forms used for the continuous mention of referents.

As was the case for referent re-introduction, we observed a roughly similar distribution of different forms in both bilingual and monolingual children's English: They preferred pronouns (62.6%, 63.6%), used [the + FNP] about one third of the time (36.4%, 36.4%), never used [a + FNP], and seldom used null forms.
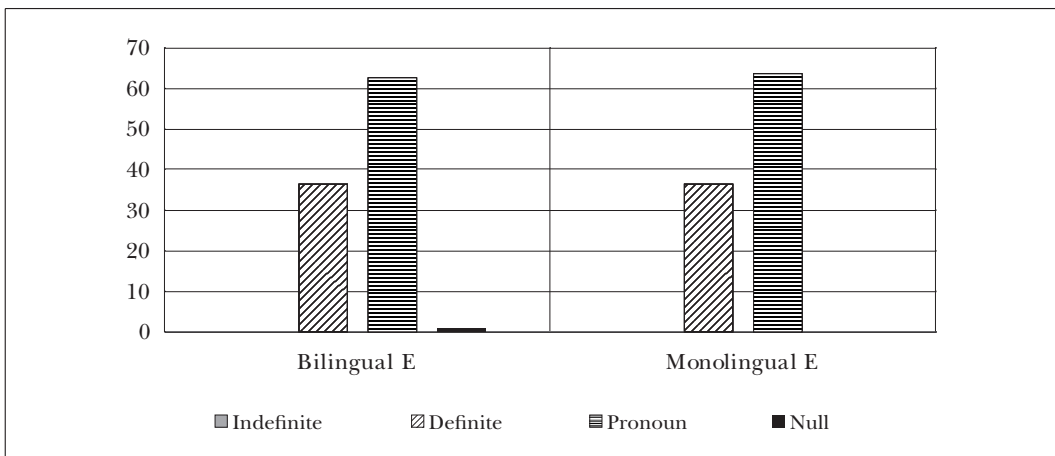
Figure 3. The mean percentage of each referential expression used for referent maintenance for each subject group

To summarize, our analysis shows that the bilingual children's English narratives were comparable to those of the English monolinguals in terms of referring expressions used in re-introducing and maintaining a referent. However, bilinguals tended to use more definite NPs than their monolingual peers to introduce a referent for the first time in discourse.

6. Discussion

6.1. Bilingual-monolingual comparison of referring expressions in English narratives

The current results revealed that bilinguals and monolinguals demonstrate similar patterns in the use of referring expressions in their English narratives. They typically used indefinite FNP to introduce a new referent, definite FNPs for re-introduction, and pronouns for continuous mention. Thus, overall, the data suggest that bilinguals have acquired a language-specific pattern of referential topic management strategy in English. Our results are, in principle, consistent with Minami's (2011) study of Japanese-English bilingual children of the same age range. The consistent findings from bilingual children acquiring the same language pairs living in different sociolinguistic environments would suggest that, despite the difference in the socially-dominant language the children are exposed to, bilingual children in the US and Japan exhibited similar tendencies in the use of referring strategies in English.

One deviation found in the current data was that, although bilingual children referred to the newly introduced referent by predominantly using the indefinite article followed by NP, they used definite NPs for referent introduction more frequently than their monolingual peers did. The same tendency was observed in Chen and Lei (2012), where the Chinese-English bilingual nine-year-olds produced more definite NPs for character introduction in English. Chen and Lei suggested that bilingual children at age nine might still be learning to make appropriate use of referring expressions to introduce a new referent in discourse. This analysis is also consistent with the developmental studies on monolingual speaking children of a variety of languages, which have indicated that younger children do not use indefinite expressions reliably (Hickmann et al., 1996; Kuntay, 2002; Nakamura, 1993). It has been argued that younger children are yet to acquire the adult-like marking of accessibility—introducing a referent for the first time in discourse, and assuming no prior knowledge on the part of the listener—which is, in general, a challenging task for younger children. We may speculate that a slight difference in the development of indefinite NP use is perhaps due to fewer chances to experience or use narrative forms, considering the fact that for these children, English is a socially non-dominant language. We could also conjecture that structures that involve the "social-cognitive linguistic" function (Kuntay, 2002) could be vulnerable to bilingual processing in general.

6.2 Any indication of language contact?

Some previous studies (Chen & Lei, 2012; Serratrice, 2007) have indicated that the

differences between the monolingual and bilingual referring expressions can be caused by the influence from the other language. Especially in the two studies above, bilinguals differed from the monolinguals in the use of reference in re-introduction and maintenance contexts, in both cases suggesting influence from English to Italian or Cantonese. In the current data, however, the distribution of bilingual children's referring expressions in these two contexts was almost identical to that of the monolingual children. Considering the fact that the overuse of definite articles for referent introduction is not likely to be an influence from Japanese, we can infer that the bilingual children's English narratives do not exhibit any features of Japanese—that is, due to language contact in the children.

6.3. Limitations and future directions

Since the number of participants is limited, the results should be considered as tentative. The current study is also incomplete in the sense that it analyzed only the English narratives of the bilingual children. Analyzing Japanese data with a monolingual comparison would reveal further characteristics of bilingual referential strategies.

One potential weakness of the current study is that the monolingual data were drawn from a corpus; as such, the data elicitation method was not controlled in a precise manner. The method of narrative elicitation, for example, whether or not the researcher and the participants were sharing the picture book, or to what extent the listener responded and tried to elicit utterances from the children, can affect the selection of referent forms. Obtaining data based on a controlled data collection method is necessary for a meaningful comparison.

It should also be pointed out that the participants may show different tendencies as some acquired the two languages from the earliest stages of language acquisition, whereas for others, the initial exposure to the second language occurred after entering school. Such a difference, for example, may manifest in the referential choice in the referent introduction context, which is considered as a challenging task for younger learners. Adding more data and dividing the children into groups according to the acquisition patterns would give more insight into the investigation of how bilinguals' referring strategies develop and to what extent the input conditions would affect the characteristics of referential choice patterns.

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