Bimodal bilingual children's use of referents in their spoken English

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Abstract

Balanced bilingual children have been argued to allow pragmatically inappropriate for L(anguage)A forms in their LA if such forms are appropriate in L(anguage)B (overview in Sorace 2011). Much of this research has focused on the production of arguments in the languages of children acquiring a null- in conjunction with a non-null subject (NS) language. However, the prediction spans across other areas related to pragmatic appropriateness of argument production, e.g. introduction/maintenance of referents. We examine the English of bimodal (ASL-English) bilingual children (BIBIs). We include both young hearing children of Deaf adults (KODAs) and congenitally deaf children with cochlear implants (CIs).

Participants: twelve BIBIs (seven KODAs, five CIs; *Mean age=6;01),* with consistent two-language input provided from the early age, and normal (or above) nonverbal intelligence scores. The participants watched a short video and then relayed the story. Each narrative was coded for the first ten mentions of each of three categories: (1) 3rd person pronouns (e.g. "he"), (2) indefinite noun phrases (NPs) with a clear indefinite article (e.g. "a"), and (3) definite NPs with clear definite articles (e.g. "the", "those"). Each NP was also coded for pragmatic appropriateness. Additionally, because BIBIs are known to show effects of cross-linguistic syntactic interaction (Lillo-Martin et al. 2009, i.a), a subset of participants (five KODAs and two CIs, *Mean age=6;06)* were also administered a grammaticality judgment test in order to determine whether BIBIs allow embedded NSs in English. Two toys performed some action; the experimenter spoke for one of the toys. A cat described the situation, omitting subjects in 50% of the test trials. Children were asked to judge and correct the cat's sentences. 50% of fillers were also ungrammatical in adult English (agreement/tense errors). The BIBIs' performance was compared with a monolingual English (age 6;02) and a unimodal multilingual (English/Croatian/Taiwanese, age 8;06) controls.

RESULTS: BIBIs performed differently from controls on the grammaticality judgment task: they were less accurate in rejecting ungrammatical sentences, and accepted significantly more embedded NSs ($z=4.37$, $p>.0003$). Yet, BIBIs showed age- appropriate patterns in the use of referents in narratives. Age correlated significantly with the pragmatic appropriateness of NPs ($r(413)=0.097$, $p<0.05$). Pragmatically appropriate use of pronouns (Mean=0.87) and indefinite NPs (Mean=0.95) were high, with definite NP performance lower (Mean=0.69) but consistent with reports for English monolingual children (Abbot 2006).

Results suggest that BIBI children (KODA/CI) reveal language interaction effects in argument suppliance, which are dissociated from the knowledge of pragmatic appropriateness.

References

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