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Intervention and cross-language transfer in bilingual aphasia – two single case studies

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More than half the world’s population is bilingual, hence bilingualism is becoming the rule rather than the exception (Grosjean, 2008). Combined with a growing number of strokes this leads to an increasing number of bilingual speakers with aphasia. As clinicians are facing more bilingual clients, and there is limited time for assessment and treatment, the question of cross-language transfer in bilingual aphasia rehabilitation has arisen (Kiran & Roberts, 2010).

The paper presents two single case studies, and the aim of the studies is to explore whether therapy in a late acquired language (L2/L4) can result in improvement of both the treated and the untreated languages of bilingual/multilingual speakers with aphasia. If bilinguals share a conceptual system for both/all their languages, semantic therapy in one of the languages should also benefit the other, not directly treated language and lead to a cross-language transfer (Kroll & Stewarts, 1994).

The first participant is a quadrilingual 59 year old female, with Japanese as L1, English as L2, German as L3 and Norwegian as L4. She suffers from moderate aphasia following a left hemisphere stroke. The second participant is a bilingual 74 year old female with English as L1 and Norwegian as L2, suffering from moderate to severe aphasia following a left hemisphere stroke. Two different treatment protocols provided in an intensive schedule with 20-25 hours over four weeks each were administered for both participants. Both protocols focused on the production of verbs in connected speech. The treatments consisted of Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA) (Wambaugh & Ferguson, 2007) and communication-based treatment, provided in the participants’ L4 and L2 (Norwegian), respectively. Outcome measures included the BAT (Paradis & Libben, 1987) in both/all languages, picture description and production of personal narratives.

For participant 1 the standardised test results show a significant improvement in the participant’s L2, L3 and L4 and an improvement in L1 in some domains. This was especially evident after the communication-based treatment. This indicates a cross-language transfer from the participant’s L4 to her untreated L2 and L3, and some transfer to L1. The second participant is currently undergoing treatment, hence the data has not been analysed yet.

The results from the quadrilingual participant show that treatment in a late acquired language can lead to cross-language transfer to untreated languages, and the treatments seem effective in improving the production of verbs in connected speech. The results from the two single case studies will be compared and discussed in light of relative proficiency, inhibition of untreated languages, structural differences between the languages and models of bilingual language processing.

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