



Bilingualism accentuates children's conversational understanding

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Abstract: Although bilingualism is prevalent throughout the world, little is known about the extent to which it influences children's conversational understanding. Our investigation involved children aged 3–6 years exposed to one or more of four major languages: English, German, Italian, and Japanese. In two experiments, we examined the children's ability to identify responses to questions as violations of conversational maxims (to be informative and avoid redundancy, to speak the truth, be relevant, and be polite).

Key words: Bilingualism, flexibility, children's metalinguistic, Conversational Violations Test

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Introduction

Bilingualism is present to some extent in every society and at least half of the world's population uses more than one language in everyday life. From this perspective, it is monolingualism rather than bilingualism that is uncommon. Yet the developmental consequences of early childhood bilingualism remain controversial. In Britain, for example, misgivings about its importance have resulted in decreasing numbers of children from English-speaking homes studying a second language. Here we report evidence that early access to a second language promotes young children's awareness of effective responses in conversation with others.

Bilingualism has been found to have a positive effect on children's ability to judge grammar and to substitute symbols. In this sense, exposure to more than one language appears to facilitate children's metalinguistic awareness. There is also evidence, albeit inconsistent, that bilingualism advantages attentional and executive control processes. Moreover, research on conversational interactions has shown that, from an early age, bilingual children can make appropriate choices of the language for communication and can differentiate their language use in ways that are sensitive to context. Findings of flexibility in the representation and usage of language and enhanced executive control indicate that early bilingualism should be accompanied by advanced skills in identifying effective responses in conversation. However, little is known about the extent to which bilingualism influences performance on measures of conversational understanding—a process that is often central to cognitive development and learning.

In his widely influential analysis, the philosopher Paul Grice depicted communication as a cooperative exchange. He proposed that appreciation of certain conversational maxims provides the foundation for pragmatic competence. These maxims enjoin speakers to “say no more or no less than is required for the purpose

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of the (talk) exchange” (Maxims of *Quantity*), “tell the truth and avoid statements for which there is insufficient evidence (Maxims of *Quality*)”, “be relevant (Maxim of *Relation*)”, and “avoid ambiguity, confusion and obscurity (Maxims of *Manner*).” To characterize the nature of effective communication more fully, Grice also discussed the need to invoke other maxims such as “be polite” (Maxim of *Politeness*) that have traditionally been recognized as key to conversational processes.

Even in the earliest years, children demonstrate sensitivity to conversational maxims. Given studies suggesting that bilingualism serves to promote children's metalinguistic awareness, the aim of a recent investigation was to determine whether bilingual children aged 3 to 6 years excel in their recognition of certain key instances of maxim violations compared to their monolingual counterparts. For this purpose, a Conversational Violations Test (CVT) was employed to examine children's ability to identify utterances that violate the Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Politeness. Previous studies have shown that typically developing children are advantaged on the CVT compared to children with limited access to conversation such as children with autism and deaf children with hearing parents. To compare the performance of monolinguals and bilinguals, the CVT was given to two groups of children from the Trieste, Italy, and the Slovenian border area: one that was monolingual in Italian and the other bilingual in Slovenian and Italian. Using a laptop computer, children were shown a DVD in which short conversational exchanges in Italian were staged by three doll speakers, one male and two female. For each episode, one of the two female speakers asked a question to the other two speakers who each gave a short answer. One answer violated a conversational maxim and the other did not. The children were asked to “point to the doll that said something silly or rude.” Though comparatively delayed in their Slovenian as shown by performance on picture vocabulary tests, children who were bilingual in Italian and Slovenian (with Slovenian as the dominant language Slovenian spoken at home) generally outperformed those who were either monolingual in Italian or Slovenian in detecting utterances that violate conversational maxims with older children outperforming younger ones.

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Contrary to the view that an early bilingual advantage is based on parental interpersonal sensitivity rather than enhanced access to language, it has long been observed that parents' motivation in sending their children to second language schools is to secure better employment and social conditions for their children rather than by a perceived need to engage in dialogues with speakers of another language. Nevertheless, these initial results were restricted to children with proficiency in either Italian or Slovenian or both languages. There was no comparison of bilinguals' CVT performance in both their languages and no direct measure of socioeconomic status despite evidence that differences between bilingual and monolingual children on measures of cognitive development may reflect non-linguistic factors based on pre-existing SES differences and the contentious debate over whether such factors may overshadow a bilingual advantage.

To examine these issues, the present research involved children aged 3 to 6 years exposed to one or more of four major languages: English, German, Italian, and Japanese. All children participated with informed parental consent. In Experiment 1, we compared performance on an Italian version of the CVT by children bilingual in German and Italian (with German as Slovenian and Italian as) with Italian monolingual children. We sought to compare performance on the CVT in two other

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language groups: children bilingual in English and Japanese monolingual children. The bilingual group received the CVT in both English and Japanese permitting a cross-language comparison. In our comparison of these two groups, children received a measure of verbal mental age. We also sought to provide innovative evidence on possible cultural differences between the language groups by questioning mothers on their Japanese identity. Moreover, as food and eating contribute importantly to communicative expectations and socialization practices we examined mothers' food preferences.

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