

Input and dominance in bilingual first language acquisition

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Several studies on bilingual first language acquisition have demonstrated that children who are raised in a largely monolingual environment are likely to develop one dominant and one “weaker” language (WL). The dominant language is generally thought to develop like an L1. However, there is no agreement on the assessment of the WL and different studies have produced contrasting results. Schlyter (1993) has argued that the WL is similar to an L2, while in more recent accounts Bonnesen (2009) and Meisel (2007) have argued that it differs both from an L1 and an L2, and it can be considered as a slowly developing L1. It is yet not clear to what extent the weak language is affected in each linguistic domain and whether imbalance can be attributed merely to the exposure to limited input.

In order to examine these issues, original longitudinal data from 4 bilingual Italian-English children is employed. On the basis of the data, I propose an analysis of the input in bilingual language acquisition and evaluate its effects on the development of the minority language. I also present a model created to measure different variables and make predictions on the development of the minority language.

The results show that the qualitative nature of the input influences the child’s linguistic development, even if the exposure to the language is relatively limited.

This study contributes to the understanding of the processes underlying the acquisition of the minority language, and introduces a new model to assess and predict imbalance in early bilingual language acquisition.

References

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