

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of second language age of onset on the development of syntactic competence in bilinguals. Forty-five bilingual children were tested using a picture-matching task with relative clauses. In this paradigm, children are aurally presented with relative clauses of various kinds and are asked to match what they hear with the appropriate picture (out of four choices) on the screen. More specifically, our experiment compared the comprehension of subject- vs. object-extracted center-embedded relative clauses and contained sentences with noun phrases (NPs) that did or did not match in number (both NPs singular or plural = match, one NP singular, one NP plural = mismatch). We compared the performance of a group of Simultaneous bilinguals (two languages since birth), Early sequential bilinguals (first exposure to L2 - English between the ages of 1 to 4) and Late sequential bilinguals (first exposure to L2 -English after the age of 4 but latest at the age of 6 – primary school). The mean age of the participants at the time of testing was approx. 10 years of age. The results show that there is a varied pattern in the comprehension strategies used among the three bilingual groups. The group of Simultaneous bilinguals showed more reliance on the syntactic information contained in the relative clause (large effect of Subject relative vs. Object relative). The other two groups, those of Late and Early Sequential bilinguals, showed more sensitivity to number dissimilarities (morphological feature of Match vs. Mismatch). The time of onset of each group was confirmed to be a relevant factor in motivating changes in the linguistic behavior of bilingual children. These findings are interpreted in the light of current relevant research outcomes in the field, psycholinguistic models of sentence comprehension, works on bilingual language functioning and acquisition and, overall, provide further insight into the linguistic nature of bilingualism.

Keywords:

bilingualism, bilingual acquisition, childhood bilingualism, language acquisition, language comprehension, bilingual brain, simultaneous bilingual, sequential bilingual, time of exposure, age of onset, relative clauses, markedness, Subject relative, Object relative, number dissimilarity, syntax, morphology