



MA thesis report.  
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## Effect of Time of Exposure to L2 on the Comprehension of Relative Clauses in Primary School Children

### Synopsis

The thesis of Alzbeta Brabcova deals with the acquisition of complex structures in bilingual children with different ages of onset. The student tested 45 children in international primary school of the Prague metropolitan area, using a picture-matching task with relative clauses. Children were divided in 3 groups, depending on the age of first exposure to English. The group of simultaneous bilinguals was composed of children exposed to two languages from birth, the group of early sequentials was composed of children exposed to English for the first time at the age of 2-3, and the group of late sequentials was composed of children exposed to English from the age of 4-6. The results show that age of onset does play a role in the development of complex syntax, and only children with a very young age of onset behave as monolinguals when processing relative clauses. Early and late sequentials, instead, show atypical patterns, being influenced more by morphological than syntactic properties of the clauses.

### Strong points

The candidate showed excellent logistic skills in creating a collaboration with 3 international schools in the Prague metropolitan area, and she showed excellent methodological skills, testing a total of 45 children with a battery of around 1h per child. The data analysis is appropriate - considering that the student received only a few hours of training in statistics during her visit in Cambridge.

### Weak points

The writing up of the thesis was relatively convoluted, and some parts maintain some level of confusion despite extensive review. The data analysis is appropriate if we consider the training, but different analyses could have been included if the student aimed at publishing the work.

I will now discuss each section of the thesis separately.

#### Theoretical background:

In this section the student deals with the definitions used in the study of bilingualism, and successfully manages to give a feeling of their complexity. A linguistic analysis of relative clauses (and complex syntax more in general) is offered, and the student seems to grasp complex linguistic concepts and formalisations. The student, in addition, included descriptions of neurological approaches to the study of bilingualism, with a certain success if we consider that this is not the main focus of her studies. The flow of the argument is not always smooth, but the information included is relevant.

#### Methods:

The methods used in this study are described with great precision and rigour. This appears as the most successful section of the thesis. The explanations are detailed enough so that new researchers would be able to replicate her study if they were interested.

#### Analysis:

I find the analysis appropriate if we consider the amount of training the student received. The tests used are simple but well chosen. There is no model including the entire bundle of data, but this seems like a minor limitation and it seems like a reasonable option to keep the model simple. The use and interpretation appears rather “didactic”, since the student uses a terminology that is found in textbooks but not in papers, such as “since the p value was smaller than .05 we rejected the null hypothesis”. I find this choice of wording to be a positive fact, since it clearly shows an understanding of the basic principles of statistics and data analysis, two aspects that are crucial when attempting an experimental approach to the study of language.

#### Discussion:

The discussion offers a reasonable interpretation of the data, and the implications of this data are indeed interesting for the scientific community. Also in this case, the flow is not always entirely smooth, but overall the discussion seems solid, simple and rigorous.

In conclusion, I believe that Ms Brabcova has completed an original and fair thesis, and she has shown good writing skills and excellent practical skills. I suggest the thesis to be accepted with a grade of **one** or **two**, depending on the performance at the defence.

Questions for the defence:

1. What do you think are the differences between age of onset and input effects, if any?
2. There is no model including the 3 groups together, but nonetheless some conclusions can be drawn also regarding group comparisons. What are they?
3. In terms of practical applications of your findings, what would you advice to parents of bilingual children?
4. How would you develop this study further, if you had the occasion?

Luca Cilibrasi, PhD

29 August 2018

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Luca Cilibrasi', written in a cursive style.