The Acquisition of Reflexives and Passives in Bilingual Children

This study investigates the acquisition of passives and reflexives in bilingual Greek-German 3.5 to 6.5 year-old children and compares it to the Terzi et al.’s (2014) study conducted with Greek children of the same age range. This study examines whether bilinguals pattern after monolingual children, given that Greek and German use different structures for passives and reflexives.

There is an ongoing debate on the acquisition of passives and their age of acquisition cross-linguistically. It has long been observed that their comprehension is delayed (Maratsos et al. 1985; Bever 1970). Borer & Wexler (1987) posit that children understand verbal passives early if they treat them as adjectival passives because they do not involve A-chain formation. Fox & Grodzinsky (1998) claim that children encounter problems only with long passives of non-actional verbs that is, they cannot do θ-role transmission. In their 2008 study, Driva & Terzi did not find a significant difference between long and short passives. By contrast, reflexives have been found to be acquired early cross-linguistically (Varlokosta 2000, 2002; McKee 1992).

Turning to the languages examined here, Greek is underspecified for passive and reflexive constructions. Namely, both constructions use non-active morphology making their interpretation ambiguous (in the case of passives without a by-phrase, Tsimpi 1989, 2006, Embick 2008, Alexiadou et al. 2015 among others). Passives are acquired late in contrast to reflexives (Driva & Terzi 2008; Terzi & Wexler 2002). German lacks such an underspecification: reflexives are formed using the reflexive pronoun sich and passives periphrastically using werden+past participle. In German, passives are acquired earlier than in Greek along with reflexives which also appear early (Alexiadou & Zombolou 2014, 2015; Armon-Lotem et al. 2016). This study investigates whether Greek-German bilingual children diverge from Greek monolingual children in their acquisition path. Could the simultaneous acquisition of these two languages affect the pattern of acquisition?

My hypothesis is that bilingual children will be sensitive to passives at a younger age than their monolingual peers due to the unique structure for passives in German in contrast to the syncretic structure in Greek (Alexiadou et al. 2015). This may provide bilinguals with additional cues that aid the disambiguation of the two structures in Greek. To investigate this, 20 Greek-German bilingual children are currently being tested in a bilingual kindergarten in Berlin and are to be compared to the two groups previously recruited by Terzi et al. (20 participants within each group as well) using the same experimental procedure namely, a picture-matching task. They found that children were less accurate in passive verbs with passive interpretation than in reflexive verbs with reflexive or passive interpretation.

Two outcomes seem possible in this study: i) Bilinguals can decode the Greek syncretism based on their experience with German passives and reflexives. If this is the case, then we can interpret this as evidence supporting theories that claim bilinguals are faster in acquiring linguistic structures in one language, when these are supported by their other language. ii) Bilinguals exhibit no advantage. If this is the case, we can interpret this as evidence supporting theories that foreground the role of input frequency as well as the nature of the structure to be acquired (especially given that the input of bilinguals varies and that passives are considered to be acquired late across languages).