



The fine-grained effects of bilingualism on children's lexical-semantic development

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Abstract

Language acquisition is a fluid and dynamic process determined by both learner-internal and environmental factors. My research takes an individual differences approach with the aims of specifying the influence of multiple factors and drawing practical implications for language assessment. In this talk I will present a series of studies of lexical-semantic development in bilingual children including those who use Mandarin-English, Spanish-English, and American Sign Language-English. The experimental tasks probe the depth of semantic knowledge, cognate awareness, taxonomic awareness, and the awareness of compounding and derivational morphological rules. The results revealed nuanced effects of bilingualism (i.e., divided language input) on lexical-semantic learning outcomes that interact with language dominance, task demand, and scoring methods. Moreover, the findings suggest that the effect of first language typology on second language development depends on the language feature under investigation.

Bio

Professor Li Sheng is a faculty member at the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies and an affiliated member of the Research Centre for Language, Cognition, and Neuroscience at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Prior to joining PolyU, she held faculty positions at the University of Texas Austin and the University of Delaware from 2007 to 2021. She directs the Language Learning and Bilingualism Lab and conducts basic, translational, and clinical practice research with the goals of advancing understanding of the mechanisms of language development and improving the quality of life of individuals who have language disorders. She studies how learner-internal factors, such as learning capacity and executive functions, environmental factors, such as the quantity and quality of language input, and linguistic factors, such as properties of the to-be-learned languages jointly shape learning outcomes. Through these investigations, she aims to develop psychometrically sound diagnostic tools to facilitate the early and accurate identification of monolingual and bilingual children with language disorders, and to contribute to the design of effective intervention programs.