

Liquan Liu

The Effects of Bilingualism on Infant Language Development

The Acquisition of Sounds and Words

This dissertation discusses the influence of bilingualism on infant sound and word acquisition in the first two years of life. It studies whether monolingual and bilingual infants follow the same language developmental trajectory, and displays similarities and differences between monolingual and bilingual infants.

Monolingual and bilingual infants from 5 to 18 months were tested on their perception of consonant, vowel, tone contrasts, and their associative word learning ability. Parents filled in a Communicative Development Inventory questionnaire, and a multilingual infant questionnaire designed by the author.

In the sound perception experiments, no evident/clear delay was observed between monolingual and bilingual infants. For consonants, an early unstable perception pattern was observed in bilingual infants in the first year of life, leaving space for future research. Bilingual infants displayed more sensitivity than monolinguals in their perception of native vowels and non-native tones. In word acquisition, bilingual infants kept the same pace as monolinguals in their associative word learning performance, as well as receptive and expressive vocabulary size. In the questionnaire study, parents' intuition of their bilingual infants' degree of exposure to each language covered not only the languages directly spoken to their infants, but also the indirect linguistic input from the ambient environment. To integrate various findings, two hypotheses, the heightened acoustic sensitivity hypothesis and the minimum threshold hypothesis, were formed.

This dissertation is of interest to psycholinguists, phonologists, and researchers on bilingualism and infant studies. The multilingual infant questionnaire is recommended as a tool of degree of exposure estimation for bilingual infants.

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