Interactions in a bilingual mind: Connective acquisition by Russian-German early sequential bilinguals

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This study focuses on the acquisition of additive connectives by Russian-German early sequential bilinguals. This language combination is particularly interesting because the conceptual space covered by German *und* 'and' is divided between two Russian connectives – *i* 'and' and *a* 'and/but'. Similarly, the functional domain of the Russian connective *a* 'and/but' is covered by three German connectives – *und* 'and', *aber* 'but' and *sondern* 'but'. In line with the usage-based approach to language acquisition, we hypothesize that distributional properties of the dominant language (German) may pre-empt relevant conceptual distinctions in the children's L1 (Russian), since the more a child is exposed to a particular construction, the more entrenched this construction will be in her mind. Further, following the cumulative complexity hypothesis, we predict that connectives denoting negative relations will be acquired later than connectives denoting positive relations because the former are more conceptually complex. We also expect that bilinguals over-use additive connectives in their L2 in order to compensate for a delayed acquisition of more complex coherence devices.

To test these hypotheses, we analyzed narratives elicited from 60 bilingual children aged 4- to 6-years-old. Each child produced two different stories, matched on a number of dimensions, in her two languages. The stories elicited from bilingual children were compared to those produced by 90 monolingual controls acquiring either Russian or German.

As predicted, bilingual children used more additive connectives than their monolingual peers, probably as an attempt to compensate for a delayed acquisition of more complex coherence devices in L2. Another factor is transfer from L1: bilinguals over-extended the functions of Russian *a* 'and/but' to the German connectives *und* and *aber*. Taken together, these findings corroborate a usage-based view of language acquisition as an active process of analyzing and generalizing over distributional patterns in the input. The results show that categories and their functions in child language are not stable; they are constantly changing in the process of distributional learning. Since the bilingual subjects in our study were raised in a dominant German-speaking environment, more frequent input from German pre-empted relevant conceptual distinctions in the semantics of the additive connectives in the children's L1, which has lead to a re-construction of the conceptual space of additivity. However, L1 attrition appeared to be selective – only elements for which there is a counterpart in L2 were re-conceptualized in L1; language-specific elements having no competitor item in L2 remained intact.