

# Multilingual child language acquisition: Comparing the development of the heritage and the majority language

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Children who grow up speaking one language in the home (home or heritage language) that is different from the language of the society they live in (societal or majority language) are a very heterogeneous group in terms of language outcomes in the two languages. The heterogeneity depends to a large extent on the amount of language exposure and use in a formal and an informal environment, which changes dynamically when children start attending kindergarten and school and engage more in activities that require the use of the majority language.

Research on the acquisition of the heritage and majority languages in children has addressed predominantly the acquisition of morpho-syntactic phenomena that are well studied and understood in first and second language acquisition research. This leaves many phenomena understudied that have not attracted the attention of mainstream language acquisition research. One such phenomenon is the acquisition of rhetorical questions (RQs).

Rhetorical questions (RQs) are syntactically interrogatives with the pragmatic function of an assertion that is used to signal the speaker's attitude, as illustrated in (1) below.

- (1) Who wants to pay taxes?

In example (1) world knowledge provides indicates that this is not an information seeking question (ISQ). World knowledge is not the only cue for disambiguating RQs from ISQs. In German, RQs and ISQs can be distinguished through lexical-syntactic cues, such as discourse particles (DiPs; Bayer & Struckmeier, 2017; Biezma & Rawlins, 2017) and through phonetic (e.g., duration, voice quality) and phonological (e.g., pitch accents, boundary tones) cues (Braun et al., 2019). Example (2) illustrates a question that can be interpreted as ISQ or RQ. Example (3) shows that the use of the DiPs 'denn schon' leads to a RQ interpretation.

- (2) Wer mag Bananen? - RQ or ISQ interpretation

Who likes bananas?

- (3) Wer mag denn schon Bananen? - RQ interpretation

Who likes DiP DiP bananas?

To date there is very limited research on how children acquire RQs and what cues they use to disambiguate a RQ from an ISQ. In this talk I will present results from our project '[Non-Canonical Questions in Early and Late Bilingual Language Acquisition](#)' that investigates how bilingual children acquire RQs in Italian as a heritage language and German as a majority language. The presentation will focus on early bilingual children growing up in Germany and will address what cues they use when they interpret Italian and German questions. Are they able to use lexical-syntactic, phonetic and phonological cues equally well in both languages? Are there differences between their heritage language, Italian, and their majority language, German, and what role does the input play in their success?

## References

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