

Phonology in action – creating a phonological profile of Polish-English bilingual immigrant children

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Since the EU enlargement in 2004 there has been a steady influx of Polish migrants to the UK. The children of those migrants are usually early bilinguals speaking Polish at home and English at school. In the following presentation, we will talk about a series of investigations into the phonological development of these children. The studies have been conducted as part of the NPRH grant, in co-operation with Warsaw University and Jagiellonian University. The aim of the project is to create a linguistic profile of Polish-English early bilinguals including the analysis of phonological, morphosyntactic and discourse features. Further, it intends to identify potential language problems that the bilingual migrant children might face upon return to the country of origin. Such a profile could find application for language intervention and training guidelines for teachers and speech therapists. As the project team members come from different backgrounds and frameworks, a data-driven and multi-disciplinary approach has been applied in the data analysis.

The presentation focuses on a series of phonological studies on Polish speech of the bilingual children, conducted within the project. The data collection procedures involved three tasks: non-word repetition (NWR), sentence repetition (SRT) and a spontaneous picture story retelling task, performed by around 100 children aged 4 to 7. In Study 1 children's productions of non-words have been subject to a detailed phoneme-by-phoneme analysis aimed at extracting the most common patterns in the speech of Polish-English bilingual children. Study 2 offers an analysis of children's sentence repetition with the use of phonological performance measures developed as part of the project. This study is intended to complement the findings of the phoneme-by-phoneme analysis and point to characteristic phonological patterns in the Polish speech of bilingual children.

Finally, studies 3A and 3B delve into the perception of bilingual participants' speech by preschool teachers and pedagogy students. In those online ratings the respondents are asked to assess the degree of foreign accent, acceptability, intelligibility and school potential on the basis of speech samples extracted from the sentence repetition and renarration tasks. We aim to identify features in children's speech that contribute to the perception of foreign-accentedness and to test if bilingual children may be assessed less favourably by the teachers due to their accent.

The results generated so far point to significant differences in L1 Polish speech between monolingual and bilingual children. We hope that the project findings will be of relevance to both linguists investigating theoretical issues related to early bilingual development, as well as educators and speech therapists interested in specific guidelines for teaching bilingual children.