Priming possessives in bilingual children: Testing for cross-linguistic influence

Sharon Unsworth
Radboud University

The general consensus in the child bilingual literature is that bilingual children’s two languages develop separately (e.g., De Houwer, 1990), but under certain circumstances, one may influence the other (e.g., Hulk & Müller, 2000). Recent work using structural priming (e.g., Hsin et al., 2013; Vasilyeva et al., 2010) suggests, however, that early bilinguals may in fact share syntactic representations across languages. In light of these findings, it has been proposed that cross-linguistic influence (CLI) can be conceptualized as cross-language structural priming (Hervé et al., 2016; Serratrice, 2016). This study tests this proposal using data on possessive NPs in Dutch. Like English, Dutch allows both pre-nominal and post-nominal possessives, whereas only post-nominal possessives are possible in Spanish (Table 1). For common animate possessors, preferences differ, however, with Dutch preferring the post-nominal and English the pre-nominal.

Participants are English-Dutch (n=25) and Spanish-Dutch (n=25) 4- to 6-year-old bilinguals, plus monolingual peers (n=25). Pre- and post-nominal possessives are primed using a “snap” game (Messenger et al. 2012) with a baseline, priming and post-test phase (Skarabela & Serratrice, 2009). Within-language (Dutch to Dutch) and cross-language (English/Spanish to Dutch) priming are tested. Proficiency is assessed using sentence repetition (Marinis & Armon-Lotem, 2015) and picture naming (van Wonderen et al., 2017), and language exposure is estimated using a parental questionnaire (Unsworth, 2013).

Our predictions (data collection is ongoing) include the following: i) English-Dutch will produce more pre-nominal possessives than their monolingual peers, especially during the priming phase (Bernolet et al. 2013); ii) Spanish-Dutch bilinguals will produce (even) fewer pre-nominal possessives than monolinguals, especially in the priming phase in the postnominal condition; iii) the magnitude of any priming effects will be predicted by proficiency/exposure in English/Spanish. Together, such results would provide evidence for cross-language priming as the mechanism driving CLI (or
not, should no priming effects obtain).

Table 1. Possessive NPs in English, Dutch and Spanish: preferred or only option shaded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Pre-nominal</th>
<th>Post-nominal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>the astronaut’s dog</td>
<td>the dog of the astronaut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>de astronaut z’n hond</td>
<td>de hond van de astronaut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
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<td>el perro del astronauta</td>
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References