

A large-scale study of how accent exposure affects vocabulary development

Helen Buckler¹, Priscilla Fung², Elizabeth Johnson²

¹University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom. ²University of Toronto Mississauga, Toronto, Canada

Abstract

Lexical development in bilingual infants has been receiving increased attention in recent years; much less attention has been paid to children routinely exposed to multiple varieties of their language. Despite growing evidence that multi-accent exposure affects speech processing (e.g. Buckler et al., 2017), no study has examined its role in vocabulary development. We investigate vocabulary development in monolingual children exposed to multiple varieties of their language compared to monolinguals exposed to only one variety or bilinguals learning multiple languages.

Research indicates that quantity and quality of language input correlate positively with vocabulary development. Hearing more words tends to lead to larger vocabularies (Song et al., 2014), as does hearing a greater variety of words (Huttenlocher et al., 2010). Initially, bilingual infants and toddlers have smaller vocabularies in their respective languages (Hoff et al., 2012) which is unsurprising, as their input is split between languages. Infants routinely exposed to multiple accents process speech differently to those exposed to a single variant (Buckler et al., 2017); this difficulty could extend to vocabulary learning. Furthermore, children struggle to recognize word forms across accents until nearly their second birthday (Best et al., 2009). Failing to connect word forms across accents would disrupt early vocabulary learning.

Here, we examine the role of accent exposure in early vocabulary development in monolingual multi-accented children (N=824) between 11 and 34 months of age, comparing this to monolingual mono-accented (N=1353) and bilingual (N=704) children. Accent and language exposure were assessed with a detailed questionnaire. Expressive vocabulary scores were assessed using age-appropriate MacArthur-Bates CDI forms (Words & Gestures; Words & Sentences; CDI-III; Fenson et al., 1994).

Taking all monolingual children together, they had higher vocabulary scores than bilingual children in both W&S and CDI-III indicating that bilingual toddlers (though not infants) had a smaller English vocabulary than monolinguals. Considering accent exposure, vocabulary scores of mono-accented and multi-accented monolinguals did not differ at any age.

This is the first study to demonstrate that routine exposure to multiple accents has no negative impact on children's early vocabulary development; monolingual children with exposure to multiple accents look more like mono-accented monolinguals than bilinguals.