

Cross-linguistic influence in the development of grammatical gender in bilingual children

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Abstract

The influence of one of a bilingual's languages on the other is known as cross-linguistic influence (Van Dijk et al., 2022). Cross-linguistic influence can result in delay compared to monolingual peers, but also acceleration, i.e. the earlier development of a grammatical structure in bilingual than in monolingual children. The present study investigates cross-linguistic influence in grammatical gender acquisition. The general idea is that languages with transparent gender systems can accelerate the acquisition of a language with a less transparent system and vice versa (Kupisch et al., 2022).

In our study, we focus on grammatical gender development in bilingual Dutch-German and Dutch-French children. Grammatical gender in Dutch is opaque and therefore acquired late, resulting in the overgeneralization of common *de* (as opposed to neuter *het*). French and German both have semi-transparent gender systems, but vary in their similarity with Dutch. We hypothesize that the relative transparency of the grammatical gender systems of French and German leads to the early discovery of grammatical gender in Dutch and thereby accelerating grammatical gender development.

Participants were 74 bilingual Dutch-French children in France and 74 bilingual Dutch-German children¹ in Germany aged 5 to 8 years old. We additionally tested 64 monolingual Dutch peers as a control group. Grammatical gender on definite articles and adjectives was elicited in a picture naming task. We additionally tested children's general language proficiency with the LITMUS Sentence Repetition Task (Marinis & Armon-Lotem, 2015) and we collected information on language exposure via the Q-BEx questionnaire (De Cat et al., 2021).

Preliminary findings show overgeneralization of common *de* in all groups. The similarity between the Dutch and German system accelerates Dutch-German children when grammatical gender matches between Dutch and German (resulting in a higher accuracy on Dutch neuter nouns that are also neuter in German compared to bilingual French children) and to delay when there is a mismatch in grammatical gender between the languages (resulting in lower accuracy on common nouns that are neuter in German compared to bilingual French children).