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How to test language dominance in multilingual children having 2 L1s and including a heritage language?

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Abstract

Language dominance is an important research topic in the field of children's language acquisition. This project examines the best way to test individual language dominance in multilingual children having two L1s: English and Egyptian Arabic (heritage language) to see if it correlates with societal language dominance.

A lot of studies have been done to test language dominance. However, language dominance was defined and tested differently across those studies, resulting in contradictory results. Here are some of the definitions we used in our study.

Montrul (2016) breaks down the concept of dominance into three main components: (a) competence that should be measured by direct measures giving objective results (e.g. *a preference task*; Treffers-Daller, 2019) and two other components that must be measured by indirect and subjective measures (e.g. *questionnaires or natural observations*; Treffers-Daller, 2019): (b) input; and (c) output.

Grosjean's (1997) concept of complementarity explains that dominance is domain-specific and that a language can be dominant in one domain (e.g. *syntax*) but non-dominant in others (e.g. *phonetics*) so we must test the domain that interests us because dominance is specific to the domain.

According to Treffers-Daller (2016), a combination of several measures will be necessary. Putting all these definitions and measures together, in order to test the individual dominance in simultaneous bilinguals having English and Egyptian Arabic as 2 L1s, we tested a group living in Egypt where societal language is Arabic and another group from Canada where societal language is English. In order to test the three components of dominance in Montrul's definition, we used (a) an oral production test as the direct measure for testing competence knowing that there are no standardized tests translated in those two languages. Moreover, in order to test vocabulary and syntax (the domain we are interested in), we tested the results of Guiraud's index and verbal density respectively from the narrations. We also used (b) questionnaires as the indirect measure. Our results from both the direct measures and the indirect measures were positively correlated with the societal language dominance and the place of residence of the children.

References

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