

Bidirectional cross-linguistic influence and language dominance: The case of preverbal indefinites in Cantonese-English bilingual children

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Previous research on how bilingual children simultaneously acquire two languages focus on factors that affect the degree and direction of interaction between their languages. These factors include the overlap condition (Hulk & Müller, 2000) and the language dominance hypothesis (Yip & Matthews, 2000). The present study examines both hypotheses by comparing longitudinal, cross-sectional corpus data of Cantonese-English bilinguals children's (Yip & Matthews, 2007) acquisition of preverbal indefinites with Cantonese and English monolinguals'.

English allows for indefinite nouns to appear preverbally or postverbally, but Cantonese indefinites (invoked by the numeral one) can only appear postverbally, with preverbal indefinites necessitating an existential verb:

*(jau5) jat1 zek3 gau2 fai6-gan2.
have one CL dog bark-PROG
'There is a dog barking.'

Since the overlap condition predicts that the language using a single structure influences the language which allows for two different structures, it predicts unidirectional influence from Cantonese to English in the form of decreased production of preverbal indefinites for all bilinguals, regardless of relative language dominances. In contrast, the language dominance hypothesis predicts that a bilingual's weaker language is more susceptible to undergoing influence from the stronger one, so the direction of influence may also occur from English to Cantonese, depending on each child's language dominance.

We find that bilinguals who were either dominant or balanced in English produced preverbal indefinites in both languages, and Cantonese-dominant bilinguals did not produce preverbal indefinites in either language. This data not only challenges directionality predictions, but it also implicates the significant role of language dominance.

Sub-discipline: bilingual first language acquisition

Keywords: bilingual first language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, language dominance, corpus study, preverbal indefinites

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