

Bilingual children: Dominance, cross-linguistic influence and vocabulary

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Bilinguals' exposure time to language is divided between two languages. For a variety of reasons, this division is really perfectly equal, meaning that bilingual children often know one of their languages better than the other. In other words, they often have a dominant language. Researchers have argued that language dominance might be related to code-switching, some aspects of language development, and executive function development. Language dominance is a multi-faceted construct; there are many potential approaches to operationalizing it. I will discuss some possible ways of determining language dominance in children. I will also discuss evidence for how language dominance might play a role in language and cognitive development. As will be seen, the choice of language dominance measure is critically linked with why language dominance is being measured in the first place. For example, parents are more likely to point when speaking children's non-dominant language than when speaking their dominant language. However, this finding only holds true when dominance is operationalized in terms of language use. Possible reasons for that finding will be discussed.

Bilingual children do not use their two languages in the same way as monolinguals of both languages. Their language use shows cross-linguistic influence, influence from the other language. In order to identify cross-linguistic influence, it is important to establish that bilinguals are doing something different from monolinguals and that that difference is due to knowledge of the other language. I will present some data showing evidence of cross-linguistic influence. Why do children show cross-linguistic influence? A number of different explanations have been proposed, including language dominance and interface phenomena. I will argue that cross-linguistic influence often emerges from processing. In other words, cross-linguistic influence can be conceptualized as a kind of speech error that results from competition between languages.

Since bilingual children spend less time, on average, in each of their languages than monolinguals, they might lag behind monolinguals in frequency-related domains of language acquisition, like vocabulary. Indeed, studies consistently show that bilinguals score lower than monolinguals on standardized tests of vocabulary. Vocabulary is a strong predictor of academic achievement so it is possible that bilingual children could be at risk once they start school. However, these differences do not necessarily appear in the lexical variety used in everyday discourse nor in tasks in which children are asked to generate examples of a semantic category. Several studies have shown that bilingual children can produce just as many different words as monolinguals in both of their languages on these kinds of tasks. I will argue that the task demands are different for standardized vocabulary tests and other tasks tapping lexical variety. Notably, there is greater leeway as to what is an acceptable answer in the non-standardized tasks. Furthermore, bilingual children may sometimes be able to deploy their cognitive resources flexibly and creatively in order to access words for the non-standardized tasks.