An investigation into the relationships between lexical acquisition, social cognition and metalinguistic awareness in monolingual and bilingual populations

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There is evidence to suggest that early word-learning is constrained by a number of cognitive biases. Researchers have, for example, identified a bias against assigning two labels to a single object (the Mutual Exclusivity Assumption, Markman, 1992). This bias is believed to underlie children's initial tendency to apply novel labels to novel objects. In addition, there is evidence that children use socio-cognitive cues, such as the interlocutor's intention and knowledge state (e.g. Tomasello, Strosberg and Akhtar, 1996) and statistical regularities (e.g. Houston-Price, Plunkett and Duffy, 2006) to assign reference. While it is plausible that all three learning mechanisms play a role in word-learning, little research has been done to explore the relationships between them, particularly when the offer potentially conflicting information to the word learner (cf. Jaswal and Hansen, 2006, and Grassmann, Kittel and Tomasello, 2007).

In order to address this issue, we investigated the relationship between lexical biases and socio-cognitive cues in two groups of young word learners. Specifically, we compared the willingness of monolingual and bilingual children to violate the Mutual Exclusivity constraint in response to a socio-cognitive cue indicating that the intended referent of a novel label is a familiar object (Healey and Skarabela, 2007). Neither of the two dominant accounts of lexical acquisition predicts a difference between these groups. Specifically, accounts emphasising the role of lexical biases (e.g. Markman, 1992) predict that both groups will behave in accordance with the lexical bias, whereas accounts emphasising the role of socio-cognitive cues (e.g. Tomasello, 2003) predict that all children will preferentially attend to the socio-cognitive cue. However, young bilinguals routinely violate ME *across* languages and as such may be assume it less readily *within* a language. Furthermore, bilinguals are known to have more advanced socio-cognitive skills than their monolingual peers (see Goetz, 2003), and consequently may be more sensitive to subtle socio-cognitive cues. We therefore predicted that these populations would use difference strategies to assign reference and that bilingual children would be more willing to violate ME in response to a socio-cognitive cue than their monolingual peers. This prediction was borne out, and the bilingual children subordinated lexical information to socio-cognitive information significantly more than the monolingual children.

The design of the above experiment did not allow us to determine whether this behaviour should be attributed to the bilinguals' advanced meta-linguistic awareness, their advanced socio-cognitive awareness or a combination of the two. In this talk I will present the preliminary findings of a study that systematically explores the contributions of these two factors in order to ascertain whether willingness to violate ME in response to a socio-cognitive cue is better predicted by performance in a task of meta-linguistic awareness, or a task of socio-cognitive awareness.

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