



Early Lexical Composition of Cantonese-English Bilingual Children



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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the current study:

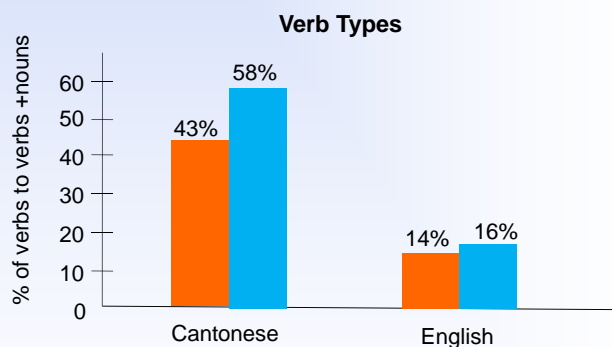
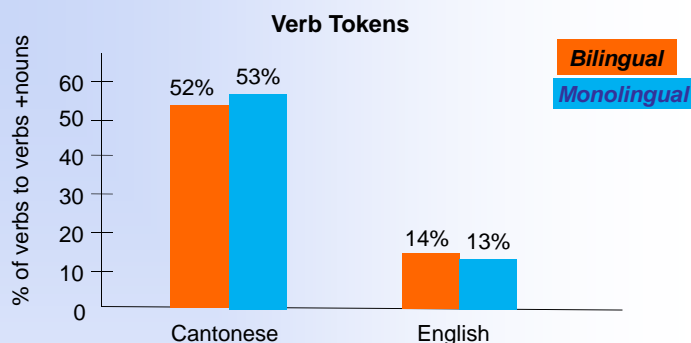
- ❖ To investigate whether nouns are conceptually easier to learn than verbs by examining the early vocabulary composition of children who are bilingual in Cantonese and English
- ❖ Nouns are learned earlier than verbs because
 - Concepts denoted by nouns are easier to access or distinguish in the world than the concepts denoted by verbs (Gentner, 1982)
 - Verbs have more informational requirements as they describe relations between relations (Gleitman, 1990)
- ❖ Evidence for the noun-verb asymmetry has been mixed:
 - Noun bias (higher proportion of nouns than verbs) in early production vocabularies found in English (Bates, et al., 1994), Japanese (Ogura, 2001) and Korean (Au et al., 1994)
 - BUT, verb bias (higher or equal proportion of nouns than verbs) reported in Cantonese (Tardif, 2006), Mandarin (Tardif, 1996), and Korean (Choi, 2000; Choi & Gopnik, 1995)
- ❖ There are other factors/mechanisms involved in facilitating the acquisition of verbs:
 - Structural features of the language: verb specificity and position saliency of verbs when the language permits dropping of post-verbal noun phrases (Tardif, 2006)
 - Pragmatic/cultural factors such as interaction style of caregivers and their child (Lee, 2006; Yuan et al., 2003)
- This study is the first to provide a direct comparison of the nature of early vocabulary composition of bilingual children between 14 and 19 months of age
 - Previous studies have mainly focused on comparing groups of monolingual children across languages
 - They cannot adequately control for individual differences or different activities of caregivers
 - If the noun bias is universal across languages, the noun-verb asymmetry would be exhibited in the early vocabulary in these two typologically different languages (English: noun-friendly vs. Cantonese: verb-friendly)

METHOD

Participants:

- ❖ The transcripts come from the Hong Kong Bilingual Child Language corpus CHILDES (MacWhinney, 1991; Yip & Matthews, 2007)
- 20 transcripts of Alicia (age 1;03 – 1;07) and 8 transcripts of Sophia (age 1;06-1;07) were analyzed
 - Exposure to Cantonese and English at birth; one parent-one language principle was adopted
 - Half an hour of conversation in each language at home on a biweekly basis
- ❖ Comparable transcripts from monolingual learners were also included in our analysis:
 - American English Corpora: Eve @ 1;06 (Brown, 1973), Naomi @ 1;02 & 1;06 (Sach, 1983), Megan @ 1;06 & Scott @ 1;07 (Warren-Leubecker & Bohannon, 1984)
 - Cantonese Corpus (Lee et al., 1991-1994): 3 transcripts of Tsuntsun (age 1;05-1;07) and 1 transcript of Bernard @ 1;07
- ❖ All utterances were categorized into various word classes:
 - Common nouns, Proper nouns, and verbs (excluding modal & auxiliary)

RESULTS



	Alicia		Sophie	
	Cantonese	English	Cantonese	English
	Tokens/Types	Tokens/Types	Tokens/Types	Tokens/Types
Common Nouns	189/83	205/71	284/92	61/31
Proper Nouns	40/11	138/32	65/13	42/13
Verbs	251/82	67/18	361/66	13/7

CONCLUSIONS

1. Percentages of verb tokens and types produced by the two bilingual children are consistent with the percentages produced by the monolingual learners
 - No similar noun-verb asymmetry exhibited in the early vocabularies of the bilingual children
2. These findings suggest that noun bias may not be a universal phenomenon across languages
 - Instead, language-specific features appear to influence word learning
3. Limitation: Small sample size for both bilingual and monolingual spontaneous production data

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