

INTRODUCING THE PRIMUS PROJECT “CORE SYNTAX IN BILINGUAL CHILDREN WITH VARYING LEVELS OF INPUT”



According to the Eurobarometer, the number of citizens in Europe who speak more than one language in their everyday life has now raised to over half of the population. This number poses new challenges for the educational system of a continent that has been locally monolingual for centuries, and where each country was normally striving for one standardised national language (Hüning et al., 2012). What type of adjustments should we ask or expect in a school system that needs to prepare for a multilingual society? Several factors can influence proficient acquisition of a second language: the age of exposure to the L2, level of immersion, quality and amount of input, socio-economic status, and so on. With this project we concentrate on one of these factors, the amount of input, and we aim at understanding particularly the effect that different levels of input can have on the acquisition of core syntactic structures.

This project builds on the work I have been conducting (or supervising) in the last years. Two masters theses were completed here at Charles University within this umbrella research agenda: Jirankova (2016) showed that second language learners of English in the Czech Republic become able to perform bound morpheme detection already from low levels of English proficiency, possibly due to the high morphological awareness related to their L1. Brabcova (2018) showed that, when looking at bilingual primary school children, only those exposed to English from birth are native-like in their processing of complex syntactic structures, such as relative clauses. Jirankova has been developing her project into a PhD thesis, and is now investigating whether the production of inflected forms follows the same pattern as perception. A crucial aspect of her work is the methodology she uses: the tasks she develops make use of nonwords, rather than real words, for the investigation. When dealing with bilinguals this choice may bring some advantages: it is well established that both children and adults speaking more than one language show longer access times to the lexicon than monolingual speakers (Byalistok et al., 2008), and thus investigating morphology and syntax with nonwords attenuates confounds related to the access to the lexicon (Cilibrasi et al., 2019). In addition, due to their artificial structure, nonwords can be built as to control for working memory effects (Gathercole & Baddeley, 2014), phonological complexity (Cilibrasi et al., 2015) and the relation between the two (Cilibrasi et al., 2018), leaving us with more direct measures of morphological processing. One line of the Primus project follows this idea and aims at creating nonword tasks that can be used to assess the processing of bound morphology (syntax “within words”, according to one view, Jackendoff, 1977), with a focus on Czech-English bilinguals.

The other line of the project complements this “no meaning” approach, by focusing on simple multiword utterances and the construction of their meaning. This part of the project will be conducted together with Dr Sileo, a Cambridge affiliated lecturer who will keep a part-time position at Charles University for the next three years. Sileo and Jaszczolt (2018) have been working at the interface of syntax and semantics, and is now extending his focus to language development to understand how children develop their ability to connect syntax and semantics. In order to do that he



will be addressing one specific type of structure: anaphoric expressions. Anaphoric expressions are of particular importance in psycholinguistic research because their functioning is regulated by a complex syntactic/semantic principle, that of co-referentiality. In order to be able to use and understand anaphoras, children must be able to connect distant elements in speech, assign to them appropriate syntactic roles as well as the same meaning. The acquisition of these complex relations is one the most challenging steps during language acquisition (Guasti, 2017).

The whole project will be mentored by Prof. Tsimpli, chair of applied linguistics in Cambridge. Prof. Tsimpli has worked extensively on second language acquisition and bilingualism, and has been developing a line of research that aims at understanding the role of input in L2 acquisition (Tsimpli, 2014). According to Tsimpli, the role of input in L2 acquisition crucially varies in relation to the type of structure investigated. Early structures, such as for example the order of heads and complements, are acquired effortlessly by bilingual children, in a short amount of time, and as such they seem not to depend strictly on input (considering that both monolinguals and bilinguals are exposed to speech for similar amounts of time during the day, the exposure that bilinguals receive in each individual language is smaller than that received by monolinguals). Other structures seem to depend strictly on input (Unsworth et al., 2011). As Unsworth et al. (2011) have shown, for example, input is a better predictor than age of onset for the acquisition of a late structure such as grammatical gender. This finding has important implications. This type of result suggests in fact that a later age of onset to the second language can be compensated by a massive exposure, also for the acquisition of complex structures that seem to be vulnerable in late sequential children. It may not be needed for children to be exposed to L2 from birth to acquire certain structures, but rather to be exposed to the L2 consistently, even if the onset arrives later (in nursery or in primary school). Using a similar approach, our project will try to understand whether extensive exposure can overcome age of onset in importance also for the acquisition of other structures, such as bound morphology and anaphoras.

Further information on the project can be found on our website: <https://csbc.ff.cuni.cz>

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