The linguistic expression of causal relations in picture-based narratives: A comparative

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Abstract

The present study explores the linguistic expression of complex picture-based narratives produced by monolingual and bilingual six year-old children with and without SLI. The approach taken probes the interaction between top-down and bottom-up processes of narrative production. Going top-down, the study explores the expression of four types of causal relations - psychological, motivational, enabling and physical - between the content categories that frame a goal-plan of action (Trabasso & Nickels, 1992). As the story used (Goralnik 1995) is rich in motion events, the bottom up analysis focused on the particular forms used to express intention and motion together.

The following research questions are addressed: (1) What are the differences between the groups in the occurrence of four types of causal relations between the story components? And (2) are there any differences between the groups in the linguistic expression of the causal relations within the complex motion event? Fifty-nine preschool children were asked to narrate a story based on a series of pictures (Goralnik, 1995): 31 Hebrew speaking monolinguals (22 with TLD, ages 4:08-5:11; 9 with SLI, ages 5:01-7:03) and 28 L1/English-L2/Hebrew balanced or L2 dominant bilinguals (17 with TLD, ages 5:02-6:05, 11 with SLI, ages 5:01-7:01). Bilinguals attended at least two years of Hebrew-speaking preschool. Children with SLI scored -1.5 SD or lower on the Hebrew standardized test and (for bilinguals) -1 SD or lower on the English standardized test.

A MANOVA with language status (monolingual vs. bilingual) and language proficiency (TLD vs. SLI) as the independent variables and the different story components and causal relations as the dependent variables shows a significant effect of language proficiency $F(3,55)$ = 3.087, p = .004, Eta2 = .402, with no effect of language status and no interaction between language status and language proficiency. That is, the results show that the stories told by bilingual children with TLD after 2-3 years of exposure to Hebrew are as complex as those of their monolingual peers, showing an emergent goal-oriented frame of action, expressed by language forms of similar complexity except for the use of less specific verbs among bilinguals. By contrast, bilingual and monolingual children with SLI show lower performance on expression of causal relations, particularly those involving more complex scenes which demand higher levels of linguistic complexity and content elaboration. No statistical support was found for the descriptive gap observed between monolingual children with SLI and their bilingual counterparts, with the former showing lower performance which hampered narrative coherence at a global level. This might be due to the small number of participants

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in the two SLI groups and the great variability within them.

The study supports previous findings about the differences between bilingual children with TLD and monolingual children with SLI, and shows no further delay in combined bilingualism and SLI. Moreover, its methodology allows tapping onto cognitive, processing and language abilities in interaction, pinpointing vulnerable domains in bilingual acquisition and language impairment, in the communicative context of narrative production.

References

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