The MAIN View from Cyprus: Tracing Narrative Abilities in Bilingual Children

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Abstract

Narratives can help identify linguistic, cognitive, semantic, and social abilities as well as communicative competence and cultural awareness of a child (e.g. Paradis et al., 2010). In fact, it has been argued that narrative skills are important for children's success at school, as evidenced by a close relationship between oral language skills and literacy (Snow, 2002). As research shows, cultural communities, language environment, home language use, parental attitudes towards bilingual and bi-cultural learning, and the level of language proficiency are some of the factors that can affect the development of narrative abilities (e.g. Jia et al., 2011).

The present study investigates the narrative production of bilingual children with typical development in both their languages: Russian and Cypriot Greek. Including our original target group of 5- and 6-year-olds (shaded in Table 1), a total of 23 simultaneous bilingual children across different age groups have so far been tested with MAIN, the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (Gagarina et al., 2012), a tool developed in COST Action IS0804 'Language Impairment in a Multilingual Society: Linguistic Patterns and the Road to Assessment'. All participants were also tested on a large battery of tests: the Developmental Verbal IQ Test, adapted to Cypriot Greek from Stavrakaki & Tsimpli's (2000) Standard Modern Greek original (Theodorou, 2013), the Russian Proficiency Test for Multilingual Children (Gagarina et al., 2010), and several tasks assessing executive functions (digit span test, word span test, fluency test, Raven's matrices).

With regard to narrative abilities (macrostructure: story structure, structural complexity, and internal states terms), the bilingual children performed similarly across their two languages. This suggests that cognitive ability is shared by two languages. Their performance was higher on the retelling condition in comparison to the telling condition. This is not a surprising finding, since retelling is considered to be easier than telling, though it is not just a repetition of a story but its reconstruction in detail and grammatical, lexical and content accuracy (Schneider et al., 2006). As expected, the bilingual children's narrative abilities also improve with age, although the number of participants in each age group are

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too low to allow a concrete generalization, though it comes out much clearer if the 23 participants are classified into their schooling level (3 children from nursery vs. 9 children from pre- and 11 children from primary school). A comparison of the participants' (telling and retelling) narrative performance with that of monolingual Cypriot Greek- and monolingual Russian-speaking children (Gagarina et al., 2012), however, shows that these outperform their bilingual peers mainly in story structure and internal state terms.

Analysis of internal-state language in children's narratives arguably reflects their theory of mind abilities (Tomasello, 2003) as well as understanding and awareness of intentionality and goal-directed behaviour of protagonists (Nippold et al., 2005), whereas macrostructure is universal and language-general, reflecting narrative discourse competence (Pearson, 2002). Bilingual children have been shown to lag behind their monolingual peers in terms of structural complexity as they are not able to produce complete and well-formed episodes and lack the understanding of narrative schemata, causality, perspective-taking, ability to plan, and meta-awareness (Westby, 2005). In our talk, we will also link the bilingual children's narrative performance with other variables we have collected data for such as the Greek DVIQ scores, Russian Proficiency Test scores, and schooling, beyond age from Table 1.

Due to the increasing number of immigrants and bilingual children in Cyprus it is important to assess their linguistic and cognitive development and distinguish between typically developing and language-impaired children. The study of language acquisition norms for typical language development, language delay, and impairment can help to prevent misdiagnosis of bilingual children with impairment.