A prosodic asset in the speech of bilingual children: the case of word stress in the speech of Polish-English bilinguals.

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The studies on prosodic competence of bilingual children have so far focused on acoustic correlates and other predictors of correct production of word stress (Khattab 2013; Lin, Wang & Idsardi 2013; Mok & Li 2015) and sentence stress (Nava, Zubizarreta 2009; Yoo 2012; Wang 2013). Significantly less attention has been paid to examining the production of prosodic patterns with respect to the acquisition of phonetic inventories.

This study focuses on the prosodic vs. segmental competence of Polish-English bilingual children. Specifically, it investigates whether the acquisition of stress is qualitatively different from the acquisition of segmental phonology and whether it is sensitive to the crosslinguistic influences (CLI) from both Polish (their parental language, L1) and English (their environmental language, L2).

To this end, we tested 85 Polish-English bilinguals (mean age 5;7, SD 8,9 months) residing in England, on two non-word repetition tasks, Polish (Szewczyk & Wodniecka 2012) and English (Szewczyk, et al. 2012). Nonwords varied in length and complexity but they were all phonotactically legal. Children’s productions were recorded, transcribed and assessed from the perspective of segmental and prosodic faithfulness, which were subsequently compared for CLI.

We also collected a number of background data about the respondents (parents’ nationality, exposure to communication in both languages, exposure to input without communication etc.) in order to establish predictors of prosodic and segmental faithfulness.

The preliminary results reveal that children resist segmental transfer with 85% efficiency in English and with 87% efficiency in Polish, whereas prosodic faithfulness in both tasks reaches the level of 99%. These differences for both languages are statistically significant (p<0.001). Our findings suggest that, unlike segmental phonology, prosodic patterns in both languages of bilingual children are resistant to CLI, which might be a consequence of them having been acquired earlier.

Keywords: bilingual children, prosodic competence, word stress, nonword repetition.