

How small language learners in Friesland and Limburg build big bilingual lexicons

In this presentation, I will discuss research that we conducted with Frisian-Dutch and Limburgish-Dutch children in the Netherlands. Frisian is officially recognized as a language and is spoken in the north of the Netherlands. Limburgish is recognized as a regional language by the Dutch government (but not by the governments of Belgium or Germany) and refers to a collection of dialects spoken in the south of the Netherlands. Children who are acquiring Frisian or Limburgish typically grow up bilingually because they also acquire Dutch, which is the standard variety, in addition to Frisian or Limburgish.

Bilingual lexical development is impacted by two counteracting or compensatory forces. On the one hand, bilingual children's language experience is distributed, resulting in less exposure to and use of one language compared to monolinguals peers acquiring this language, hence a slower lexical development. On the other hand, bilingual children's integrated lexicons enable sharing and transferring knowledge and experience, potentially speeding up their lexical development. In this presentation, I will reflect on transfer mechanisms and individual differences therein.

I will start with discussing the influence of cross-linguistic distance on lexical transfer comparing the Frisian-Dutch and Limburgish-Dutch children with bilingual Moroccan-Dutch, Polish-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch children (Blom et al., 2019). Subsequently, I will present results showing that Frisian-Dutch children who have relatively limited experience with Frisian benefit from cross-linguistic phonological regularities between Dutch and Frisian for their Frisian lexical development (Bosma et al., 2019). Using such regularities draws on a certain level of cognitive maturity, as children make more use of them when they grow older. In addition, some cognitive effort is involved, as children who have better verbal working memory abilities perform better at Frisian words that adhere to cross-linguistic phonological regularities (Bosma et al., 2017). These Frisian results on underlying transfer mechanisms and individual differences are confirmed by data from Limburg (Blom et al., in preparation). Asking children in Limburg to name pictures in their local dialect, we observed that older children, children who use dialect frequently in peer-interactions, and children from families with higher socioeconomic status used responses similar or close to the targeted dialect forms. The oldest children also tended to use hybrid forms based on cross-linguistic phonological regularities between Limburgish and Dutch, in addition to within-word code mixing, suggesting that cross-linguistic regularities between two closely related varieties enable children to build big bilingual lexicons and expand them in creative ways.

References

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