

The acquisition of Cantonese in bilingual contexts

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Most children acquiring Cantonese today are also exposed to another language from birth. In a community like Hong Kong, they grow up bilingual in Cantonese and English. How do bilingual children acquire various aspects of Cantonese in the first few years of life? Cantonese and English are two typologically divergent languages with striking contrasts in many aspects of grammar. The development of Cantonese-English bilingualism offers a unique window that allows us to see how the two target languages interact in systematic ways. In a number of grammatical domains including dative constructions, verb particle constructions, relative clauses, bilingual children's Cantonese shows cross-linguistic influence from English. Cross-linguistic influence will be illustrated by examples from the case study of 9 children aged from 1;3 to 4;6 based on longitudinal speech data from the Hong Kong Bilingual Child Language Corpus (Yip 2013; Yip and Matthews 2007, in preparation). I will then show that similar interactions take place in the acquisition of tone: in particular, English stress patterns are realized as prosodic templates.

I will discuss the relationship between Cantonese linguistics and bilingual development which constitutes a two-way street, with the fields mutually informing each other (Matthews and Yip 2014). For Cantonese linguistics, bilingual development shows how properties of Cantonese interact with another language, and which properties are vulnerable to cross-linguistic influence. At the same time, Cantonese opens new windows on bilingual development: interactions which do not arise with other language pairs, such as those between Cantonese and English relative clauses, enrich the picture of possible interactions and our understanding of their causes.