Chapter 3
Lexical Development in Typically Developing Bilingual Children:
Contexts and Processes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores lexical development in typically developing bilingual children. In particular, it examines bilingual language acquisition, the bilingual lexicon, how children differentiate between their languages, their performance on vocabulary tests in relation to language input and exposure, and the application of the mutual exclusivity principle. Additionally, the discussion includes translation equivalents and a review of available tools for evaluating the vocabulary of bilingual children.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of language learning in bilingual and multilingual environments is crucial, considering that many children around the world grow up in multilingual contexts (Tucker, 1998) and a substantial proportion of the global population speaks more than one language (Wei, 2000). Therefore, bilingualism and multilingualism are the norm rather than the exception (Coulmas, 2018).

Gaining a deeper understanding of bilingual language acquisition is not only essential within Linguistics but also has significant implications for related fields such as education (e.g., García, 2009), clinical practice (e.g., Byers-Heinlein et al.,

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-1752-6.ch003

2024), and language policy (e.g., Brown, 2011). Moreover, because parents exercise a great degree of agency in shaping the bilingual environments in which their children are raised (e.g., Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013; de Houwer, 1995), insights from bilingual language development research can support the design of informed, evidence-based strategies for bilingual parenting.

The process by which children are exposed to two languages from birth is commonly known as *Bilingual First Language Acquisition* (de Houwer, 2009a). De Houwer (1998, 2009b) argues that identifying which language a child hears first is quite challenging and suggests that prioritizing one language over the other is not necessary. To address this issue, she adopts terminology from Wölck (1987/88), referring to the languages as "Language A" and "Language Alpha", emphasizing that bilingual children acquire two first languages at the same time.

2. BILINGUAL LEXICAL DEVELOPMENT

The enormous increase in studies of both bilingual and monolingual acquisition suggests that bilingual language development is no different from monolingual acquisition (Hoff, 2017). In other words, children who are regularly and frequently exposed to two languages from birth are no different from children growing up with one language as far as the general patterns of language development are concerned (Francis, 2021; Romaine, 1999).

In particular, a substantial body of research has established that simultaneous bilingual children exhibit developmental patterns comparable to those of monolingual children (de Houwer, 2010; de Houwer et al., 2014; Genesee & Nicoladis, 2007; Junker & Stockman, 2002; Petitto & Kovelman, 2003). Studies consistently report that the age at which children produce their first words, typically between 12 and 15 months, is similar across monolingual and bilingual populations (Genesee, 2003, 2015; Genesee & Nicoladis, 2007; Patterson & Pearson, 2004). Likewise, the period of rapid vocabulary growth tends to occur at approximately 18 to 20 months in simultaneous bilinguals, closely reflecting the timeline observed in monolinguals (de Houwer et al., 2014). Furthermore, children tend to produce nouns before predicates, and predicates before functional words, regardless of their language background (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2007; Nicoladis, 2001).

Nonetheless, the presence and use of two languages may lead bilingual children to exhibit certain developmental differences not typically observed in monolingual peers (Kern et al., 2019). A consistent finding in research on bilingual vocabulary development is that, although bilingual and monolingual children tend to have comparable overall vocabulary sizes, bilingual children often score lower than their monolingual peers when each language is assessed separately (e.g., Bialystok et al.,