


Chapter 6

Vocabulary, Morphology, and Context: How Monolingual and Bilingual Children Infer Meaning From Pseudowords

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how monolingual (ML) Greek-speaking and Greek–Turkish bilingual (BL) children infer unfamiliar word meanings from context, focusing on vocabulary knowledge, morphological awareness, and language proficiency, and whether they use morphological cues. Sixty children (30 MLs; 30 BLs, divided by proficiency) completed tasks assessing vocabulary, sentence repetition, morphological awareness and word inference using pseudowords in short stories. Results showed that high-proficiency bilinguals relied on morphological awareness to infer word meanings, while low-proficiency bilinguals depended more on vocabulary depth. Monolinguals outperformed bilinguals overall, but high-proficiency bilinguals matched them on less demanding tasks (depth of VK and morphological decomposition). Morphological cues (e.g., suffixes) significantly enhanced word inference accuracy in high-proficiency bilinguals and monolinguals, whereas low-proficiency bilinguals struggled with both morphological cues and context, resulting in limited lexical inference abilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding how children derive meaning from context is crucial for unpacking the development of language comprehension skills, especially among bilingual speakers, whose linguistic abilities often are different from those of their monolingual peers (Vernice & Pagliarini, 2018). In multilingual regions like Thrace, where children from the Muslim minority grow up speaking Greek, Turkish, or Pomak—with varying language dominance, examining how contextual word learning unfolds in different language groups offers valuable insight into the mechanisms of language development in linguistically diverse settings.

The aim of this study is to investigate how children derive the meaning of unfamiliar words from context in the societal language, Greek, and to examine the extent to which vocabulary knowledge, morphological awareness, and overall language proficiency support this ability in typically developing monolingual Greek-speaking and Greek–Turkish bilingual children. Specifically, the study explores whether children rely on morphological cues—such as suffixes in pseudowords— or/and from context to infer meaning. This sheds light on how they integrate contextual and morphological information to interpret unfamiliar words.

The ability to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words from context is widely recognized as a basis for successful language acquisition and literacy development. It enables learners to autonomously expand their vocabulary, comprehend complex texts, and engage more meaningfully with academic content (Nagy & Scott, 2000). For children, especially in educational contexts, the ability to learn new words without explicit instruction is crucial to keeping pace with curricular demands. This capacity develops over time, influenced by a range of cognitive and linguistic abilities.

Contextual word learning depends on the integration of several interrelated skills, most notably vocabulary knowledge, morphological awareness, and overall language proficiency. A good vocabulary knowledge serves as a scaffold for interpreting new words, as children draw on semantic associations and lexical networks to make educated guesses about unfamiliar items (Cain et al., 2004). Recent studies emphasize that exposure to words in varied and diverse contexts significantly boosts incidental vocabulary learning, even in children with lower reading comprehension (Günther et al., 2022).

Morphological awareness—the ability to reflect on and manipulate morphemes (i.e., meaningful word parts such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots)—plays a crucial role in language and literacy development. By understanding how words are formed, learners can break down unfamiliar terms into meaningful components, making it easier to infer their meanings and usage. This ability not only supports vocabulary growth but also contributes significantly to reading comprehension (Carlisle, 2000; Dosi, 2025a, b; Dosi et al., 2025; Kuo & Anderson, 2006). Research has shown

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