Developmental Bilectalism: Investigating (A)typical language acquisition in diglossia

Kleanthes K. Grohmann, University of Cyprus (UCY), Director of CAT, the Cyprus Acquisition Team (CAT Lab)

Cyprus is in a unique position for many purposes and for many reasons. This talk will present the research agenda of the Cyprus Acquisition Team (CAT) and thereby aims to bring closer the potential impact this confined geographical space has on issues pertaining to language acquisition and subsequent development from a variety of perspectives, of imminent relevance for any study of multilingualism: bilectal Greek Cypriot children, multilingual children from multicultural family backgrounds, and children with atypical, even impaired, language development. Two main concepts will be introduced and pursued: the Socio-Syntax of Development Hypothesis and the notion of gradience in multilingualism, dubbed Comparative Multilingualism. The former takes the local linguistic variety, Cypriot Greek, seriously as the native language of Greek Cypriot children. Due to the sociolinguistic state of diglossia, children not only grow up with this unofficial, non-codified Low variety but also with the High variety: Standard Modern Greek, one of the island’s two official languages (and that of Greece). At CAT, we developed the notion of ‘(discrete) bilectalism’ to characterize speakers in such diglossic environments. Our research, in particular on object clitic placement, further suggests that bilectal children undergo refinements in their grammatical system after the critical period for first language acquisition, that is, even beyond the age of 5. One of the most predominant factors here is schooling, which falls within what we call socio-syntactic developments of language. The larger picture is one that places bilectalism on a gradient scale of multilingualism, which ranges from monolectal, monolingual speakers to multilectal, multilingual speakers across further differentiations such as bidialectalism, bivarietalism, bilectalism, and different degrees of bilingualism. Our research also suggests that this scale can be compared to performance in both receptive and expressive language tasks as well as cognitive tasks tapping into executive control.

Kleanthes K. Grohmann is Professor of Biolinguistics in the Department of English Studies at the University of Cyprus (UCY) and the Director of CAT, the Cyprus Acquisition Team (CAT Lab). He received his PhD from the University of Maryland (2000) and has published widely in the areas of syntactic theory, comparative syntax, language acquisition, impaired language, and multilingualism. Among the books he has written and (co-)edited are Understanding Minimalism (with N. Hornstein and J. Nunes, 2005, CUP), InterPhases (2009, OUP), and The Cambridge Handbook of Biolinguistics (with Cedric Boeckx, 2013, CUP). He is founding co-editor of the John Benjamins book series Language Faculty and Beyond and editor of the open-access journal Biolinguistics.

Homepage: [http://www.kleanthes.biolinguistics.eu](http://www.kleanthes.biolinguistics.eu); Email: kleanthi@ucy.ac.cy
Difference or disorder – what does L1 bidialectism tell about child SLA at the syntax-semantics interface

Weifeng Han, Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology, Flinders University

Child second language acquisition (cL2A) is a heated yet much debated topic in second language acquisition (SLA) studies (Blom & Unsworth, 2010), especially when it comes to the acquisition at various “interfaces” of the target language (Slabakova, 2008; White, 2009). For speech-language pathologists (SLPs), non-biased language assessment of bilingual children can be complex (Caesar & Kohler, 2007; Gillam, Peña, Bedore, Bohman, & Mendez-Perez, 2013). It becomes even more complicated, both theoretically and clinically, when involving first language (L1) bidialectal speakers. There has been, however, a lack of understanding on bidialectal children’s L1 syntactic and semantic development as well as a shortage of data on the development of L1 bidialectal children’s L2 acquisition (Han, Brebner, & McAllister, 2015).

Theoretically, this talk will outline why it is equally important to pay attention to the differences between L1 bidialectism and L2. Clinically, it will present that appropriate assessment tools and practices for identification of language impairment (LI) in bilingual children need to be developed (Bedore & Peña, 2008; Kohnert, 2010).

Illustrative examples of both L1 mono- and bi-dialectal speakers’ L2 performance will be presented from the perspectives of theoretical linguistics and speech pathology. Both L1 and L2 linguistic outputs from bidialectal and bilingual speakers will be discussed. The following structures, mainly based on the Semantic Subset Principle (Crain, 1992; Crain, Goro, & Thornton, 2006; Crain, Philip, Drozd, Roeper, & Matsuoka, 1992; Crain & Thornton, 1998; Notley, Thornton, & Crain, 2012), are discussed in details: the negation of universal quantification, the ambiguous focus “only”, the ditransitive construction, and the topic-comment construction.

Statistical and qualitative analyses show that L1 bidialectal knowledge has an influence on the L2 performance at the syntax-semantic interface while the same structure has more readings in L2 than in L1, but not vice versa. It seems that the more complex the L1 dialects are syntactically and semantically from each other, the more the speakers are aware of the L2 syntactic and semantic characteristics. Bilingual children may differ in L2 performance because of lack of exposure in the target language or because of their varied L1 dialectal backgrounds, but not necessarily because of language impairment.

It is proposed that L1 bidialectism be added as a variable to be controlled while evaluating the similarities and differences of cL2A of particular target language properties (cf. Haznedar & Gavruseva, 2013). When considering the syntax-semantics interface for bilingual children, a series of reliable threshold indicators for possible language impairment is urgently needed for SLPs to facilitate accurate diagnosis.

References
presented at the Workshop on the Acquisition of Wh-Extraction and Related Work on Quatification, Amherst.


---

**Weifeng Han**
PhD - Linguistics (SHISU), PhD Candidate - Speech Pathology, Flinders University

PDF (Postdoctoral Fellow) – Chinese Linguistics (Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology
Flinders University

Weifeng Han has been working as a linguist for many years in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Canada, Jamaica and Australia. His research interests mainly lie in syntax and semantics from a typological perspective and multilingualism and multidialectism from the perspective of speech pathology. Dr Han’s current research focuses on multiple dialectal knowledge of L1 being a variable in L2 acquisition at the syntax-semantics interface.

Dr Han has a PhD in theoretical syntax from the Shanghai International Studies University and is working toward a second PhD in Speech Pathology at the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology, Flinders University. He is a life member of the *International Association of Chinese Linguistics* and the *Chinese Linguistics Society*. Dr Han is currently serving as an external reviewer for several international peer reviewed journals. He is a native speaker of Wu and Mandarin.

Email: weifeng.han@flinders.edu.au
Acquisition of plural morphology by English monolingual, Chinese L1 and other L1 speaking children

Nan Xu Rattanasone, Benjamin Davies, Tamara Schembri, and Katherine Demuth, Child Language Lab, Macquarie University

Studies have emerged suggesting that Chinese-speaking children demonstrate difficulties in acquiring English inflectional morphology,1,2 even for early child second language (ECL2) learners3. A possible explanation for these results is that, unlike English, Chinese is an isolating language and does not use inflectional morphology. However, it is unclear whether the performance of Chinese-speaking ECL2 learners really differ from children speaking other languages. Few studies have tested very young ECL2 learners, such as 3- and 4-year-olds, during the early stages of L2 acquisition. Using an Apple iPad, three tests were developed to assess children’s understanding of English nominal plurals, a relatively well studied and early acquired grammatical morpheme in English monolingual children. Three groups of children – 22 English monolinguals, 19 Chinese-speaking and 19 speaking other first languages (L1) – were tested in preschools. A two alternative force choice paradigm with novel words were used. The first test examined children’s understanding of the allomorphs /s/ and /z/ (e.g., dep), the second allomorph /es/ (e.g., kosses), and finally the copula is/are (e.g., ‘where are the deps’). The results show that L1 Chinese children’s performance was significantly below both English monolinguals and children speaking other L1s on all three tasks. In addition, while the performance of children speaking other L1s increased with length of L2 exposure at preschool, no such effects were found for L1 Chinese children. Our results suggest that L1 Chinese children are not developing abilities in L2 inflectional morphology on par with monolingual and other L1 speaking children, a difference that is apparent from the very beginnings of L2 learning. This has important implications for our understanding of ECL2 acquisition especially for how language delay/impairment should be characterised across different populations of children.

References

Nan Xu Rattanasone is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Child Language Lab, Centre for Language Sciences (CLaS), and an associate investigator at the ARC Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders (CCD), Macquarie University. She received a PhD in 2009 from the MARCS Institute for Brain, Behaviour and Development, Western Sydney University. She has published in the areas of monolingual and bilingual acquisition of phonology and morphology using various behavioural methods including eye-tracking. Her recent work has been focused on the role of first language (L1) phonology and morphology on the acquisition of English L2 inflectional morphology by preschool aged second language (L2) learners.

Website: www.mq.edu.au/childlanglab; Email: nan.xu@mq.edu.au