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Bilingual toddlers have advanced abilities to repair communication failure



Stephanie Wermelinger*, Anja Gampe, Moritz M. Daum

Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has demonstrated enhanced communicative abilities in bilingual children compared with monolingual children throughout childhood and in a variety of domains. The processes underlying these advantages are, however, not well understood. It has been suggested that one aspect that particularly stimulates bilinguals' communication skills is their daily experience with challenging communication. In the current study, we investigated whether children's assumed experience with communication failures would increase their skills when it came to repairing communication failure. Non-German bilingual, German bilingual, and monolingual 2.5-year-old toddlers participated in a communication task in which a misunderstanding occurred. We hypothesized that monolingual and German bilingual children would have fewer daily communication failures—and, therefore, less well-trained repair skills—compared with non-German bilinguals. The results showed that non-German bilinguals were more likely to repair the misunderstanding compared with both monolingual children and German bilingual children. The current findings support the view that the communicative advantages of bilingual individuals develop based on their unique experience with interpersonal communication and its difficulties.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: s.wermelinger@psychologie.uzh.ch (S. Wermelinger).

Introduction

Successful communication depends on integrating various aspects of the situation—most crucially, the intentions of both the speaker and the addressee. Young children's communicative skills enable them to read others' intentions, perspectives, and knowledge states both when communicating information and when interpreting others' utterances (e.g., Ganea & Saylor, 2007; Greenfield, 1979; Liebal, Behne, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009; O'Neill & Happé, 2000; Schermer, Lieven, & Tomasello, 2015; Schulze & Tomasello, 2015). In the current study, we investigated whether increased exposure to challenging communicative situations enhances children's communicative abilities. Specifically, we explored whether the children's assumed experience with communication failures increases the likelihood of repairing misunderstandings.

Recent research has demonstrated enhanced communicative skills in bilingual children compared with monolingual children throughout childhood and in a variety of domains. One aspect in which bilinguals display an advantage over monolinguals is their sensitivity to their interlocutor's visual perspective. For example, compared with their monolingual peers, bilingual children rely more on their interlocutor's visual perspective when resolving ambiguous reference (Fan, Liberman, Keysar, & Kinzler, 2016), are better at integrating their assessment of their interlocutor's visual perspective with her or his vocal expressions (Yow & Markman, 2014), are more likely to adjust their own descriptions of the physical aspects of a game to their interlocutor's visual access (Genesee, Tucker, & Lambert, 1975), and are better at interpreting the referent of pointing gestures to resolve ambiguous pronouns (Yow, 2015) or conflicting indications of direction (Yow & Markman, 2011). In addition, bilingual children are very sensitive to situations in which meaning is ambiguous. For example, bilingual preschoolers are better at making pragmatic inferences than their monolingual peers (Siegal, Iozzi, & Surian, 2009).

The communicative advantage of bilingual children seems to be unrelated to inhibitory control (Antoniou, Kambanaros, Grohmann, & Katsos, 2014; Siegal et al., 2009; Yow, 2010; Yow & Markman, 2014; for recent reviews on bilinguals' inhibitory control, see Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010; Barac, Bialystok, Castro, & Sanchez, 2014). Instead, it has been suggested that bilingual communication skills develop as a result of bilingual children's daily experiences with challenging communication (e.g., Siegal et al., 2009; Yow, 2010). Compared with monolingual children, bilinguals encounter more challenges in language comprehension as well as in language production. Specifically, because bilingual children (compared with monolingual children) have smaller vocabularies in each of their languages (Cattani et al., 2014; De Houwer, 1990; Oller, Pearson, & Cobo-Lewis, 2007; Pearson, Fernández, & Oller, 1993), they are likely to experience an increased number of communication failures when others use words that they do not yet know. In language production, bilingual children also need to cope with communication failures due to the inappropriate use of words or language constructions—an experience that monolingual children lack. Even though 2- and 3-year-old bilingual children successfully switch their language depending on the language of their interlocutor (e.g., De Houwer, 1990; Genesee, Nicoladis, & Paradis, 1995), more than 50% of communication failures among bilingual 3-year-olds are due to their inappropriate use of words or language constructions (Comeau & Genesee, 2001). Taken together, the studies showed that bilinguals face challenging communication situations in their everyday lives. These experiences might surface as communicative advantages. Support for this view comes from studies on gesture understanding. When exposing monolingual 3-year-olds to a bilingual-like experience of communication failure, they subsequently displayed more bilingual-like behavior in their interpretation of gestures (Yow, 2010; Yow & Markman, 2016).

One area to which these communicative skills should transfer is the ability to detect and repair misunderstandings. From 2 years of age onward, children repeat or reformulate their utterances when communication fails (Anselmi, Tomasello, & Acunzo, 1986; Grosse, Behne, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010; Marcos & Bernicot, 1994; Shwe & Markman, 1997; Wilcox & Webster, 1980). Despite the extensive research on monolingual children's repair behavior, to our knowledge only one study has compared monolingual and bilingual children's abilities to repair communication failures. In their study, Comeau, Genesee, and Mendelson (2010) instructed adults to ask clarification questions to monolin-

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