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Brief Report

Children's use of linguistic information when learning in a bilingual context



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ABSTRACT

Children prefer to learn from people who are like themselves. However, who is considered “like themselves” is complex for bilingual children. Thus, the current study examined whether children's language experiences affect who they prefer to imitate. A sample of 3- to 5-year-old monolingual English-speaking children ($n = 16$), Japanese–English bilingual children ($n = 16$), and children bilingual in English and a non-Japanese language ($n = 16$) watched videos of a monolingual English speaker and a Japanese–English bilingual speaker playing with novel toys and were asked to play with the same novel toys. Although all children—regardless of language background—imitated the monolingual speaker at similar rates, the two bilingual groups imitated the bilingual speaker more often than did the monolingual children. Such results suggest that experience in speaking two languages affects children's imitation behaviors.

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Introduction

Children are selective about who they choose to learn from (e.g., Birch, Vauthier, & Bloom, 2008; Buttelmann, Zmyj, Daum, & Carpenter, 2012; Corriveau & Harris, 2009; Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Jaswal & Neely, 2006; Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011; Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2012; Kinzler, Shutts, & Spelke, 2012; Koenig & Woodward, 2010; Shutts, Banaji, & Spelke, 2010; Shutts, Kinzler, McKee, & Spelke, 2009; Vanderborgh & Jaswal, 2009; for a review, see Harris & Corriveau, 2011).

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Studies using a variety of methods indicate that children generally prefer to learn from people who are like themselves—that is, they prefer to learn from those with whom they share community membership (e.g., Kinzler et al., 2011; Meltzoff, 2011; Vanderborght & Jaswal, 2009). However, who is considered “like themselves” is complex for bilingual children; bilingual children’s community membership can be based on shared languages or the shared experience of being bilingual. Thus, this study examined who bilingual children prefer to imitate—those who speak the same two languages as them or those who share the experience of being bilingual but do not necessarily speak the same two languages.

Research with monolingual children indicates that when two social partners provide different information, children prefer to learn from the person who shares community membership with them (e.g., Birch et al., 2008; Corriveau & Harris, 2009; Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Jaswal & Neely, 2006; Kinzler et al., 2011; Koenig & Woodward, 2010; Shutts et al., 2010; Vanderborght & Jaswal, 2009). For example, monolingual infants and 2-year-olds imitate the actions of and show preferences for foods and toys endorsed by adults speaking their native language over adults speaking a foreign language (Buttelmann et al., 2012; Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2012; Kinzler, Shutts, & Spelke, 2012; Shutts et al., 2009). Furthermore, monolingual preschoolers prefer to play with novel toys used by an adult speaking their native language in a native accent over an adult speaking their native language in a foreign accent (Kinzler et al., 2011).

Community membership based on language background may be particularly relevant for bilingual children during learning. Because bilinguals must learn different information specific to the demands of their different linguistic environments (e.g., De Houwer, 2009), bilingual children may be especially sensitive to learning from social partners who share language-based community membership. That is, bilingual children may prefer to attend to bilingual social partners who speak the same two languages as them because those are the social partners who provide relevant information for a specific linguistic environment (e.g., Buttelmann et al., 2012; Kinzler et al., 2011; Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2012; Kinzler, Shutts, & Spelke, 2012; Souza, Byers-Heinlein, & Poulin-Dubois, 2013). In other words, bilingual children—more so than monolingual children—may be aware of and differentiate between social partners who do or do not share their same native languages. Differentiation of social partners based on language background may lead bilingual children to different preferences for whom to learn from than monolingual children.

Evidence suggests that bilinguals can better differentiate social partners based on language background than can monolinguals; children who have experience with multiple languages demonstrate better metalinguistic awareness than monolingual children. For instance, young children who speak two languages better understand others’ language backgrounds; bilingual children understand that a monolingual speaker lacks knowledge of another language, whereas monolingual children do not (Byers-Heinlein, Chen, & Xu, 2014; Diesendruck, 2005). Similarly, exposure to multiple languages during early childhood makes English-speaking children more likely to learn novel words from a foreign speaker than from an English speaker (Akhtar, Menjivar, Hoicka, & Sabbagh, 2012). Preschool-aged bilinguals are also aware of their own language background; when asked what language they speak, most bilingual children answer correctly, whereas most monolingual children do not (Akhtar et al., 2012). In addition, children who speak different languages are capable of differentiating between and using the appropriate language in a given context by the time they start speaking (e.g., Nicoladis, 1998; Petitto et al., 2001; Slobin, 1978). These findings suggest that early experience with two languages shapes children’s ability to conceptualize language and understand the language backgrounds of themselves and others. Such enhanced metalinguistic awareness may help bilingual children to be more cognizant of language-based community membership than monolingual children.

The current study examined how children with different language experiences use linguistic information about a speaker when deciding who to imitate. Preschool-aged children from three different language backgrounds were shown video clips of two actors—one English monolingual speaker and one Japanese–English bilingual speaker—playing with novel toys in different ways. Children were subsequently observed to see whether they played with those toys in the same way as the monolingual speaker, the bilingual speaker, or both speakers. Children’s three different language backgrounds were monolingual English (*Monolingual*), bilingual English and Japanese (*Japanese–English Bilingual*), and bilingual English and a non-Japanese language (*Other Bilingual*). The goal of this study was to determine how young children’s different language experiences influence children’s preference for

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