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# Surmounting the Tower of Babel: Monolingual and bilingual 2-year-olds' understanding of the nature of foreign language words



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### ABSTRACT

Languages function as independent and distinct conventional systems, and so each language uses different words to label the same objects. This study investigated whether 2-year-old children recognize that speakers of their native language and speakers of a foreign language do not share the same knowledge. Two groups of children unfamiliar with Mandarin were tested: monolingual English-learning children ( $n = 24$ ) and bilingual children learning English and another language ( $n = 24$ ). An English speaker taught children the novel label *fep*. On English mutual exclusivity trials, the speaker asked for the referent of a novel label (*wug*) in the presence of the *fep* and a novel object. Both monolingual and bilingual children disambiguated the reference of the novel word using a mutual exclusivity strategy, choosing the novel object rather than the *fep*. On similar trials with a Mandarin speaker, children were asked to find the referent of a novel Mandarin label *kuò*. Monolinguals again chose the novel object rather than the object with the English label *fep*, even though the Mandarin speaker had no access to conventional English words. Bilinguals did not respond systematically to the Mandarin speaker, suggesting that they had enhanced understanding of the Mandarin speaker's ignorance of English words. The results indicate that monolingual children initially expect words to be conventionally shared across all speakers—native and foreign. Early bilingual experience facilitates children's discovery of the nature of foreign language words.

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## Introduction

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. . . . And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven. . . . And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth.

—*Genesis 11: 1, 4, 6–8*

The biblical story of the Tower of Babel tells of a time when all people spoke a common language, allowing them to build a tower reaching to heaven. This hubristic act was punished, and thereafter the unity of human language was broken; different peoples could no longer speak to each other. This story provides a starting point for considering how young children understand the nature of language. Do young children realize that speakers of different languages do not use the same words to refer to the same things, or do they initially behave consistently with a pre-Babel world where all speakers share the same knowledge of words? What kind of experience might help children to understand that native language speakers and foreign language speakers do not share the same language knowledge? The current study investigated young children's understanding of this aspect of foreign languages and asked whether early bilingualism advances children's understanding that different languages constitute distinct systems of communication.

### *The conventionality of language*

The relation between words and their referents is for the most part arbitrary (Saussure, 1916/1983). Thus, to communicate successfully, speakers must assume that words form a conventional communicative system that links sound with meaning. Clark (1993) defined the notion of the conventionality of language as follows: "For certain meanings, there is a form that speakers expect to be used in the language community" (p. 67). Intertwined in this definition are two related points, namely that (a) speakers of the same language share knowledge of words in that language, but (b) speakers of different languages do not share word knowledge (e.g., a Mandarin speaker is ignorant of English-language words). The vast majority of children's early interactions are with individuals speaking what will become their native language. Consequently, an assumption that speakers share word meanings could assist children in learning new words.

There is considerable evidence that even young children understand this first facet of conventionality—that speakers of the same language share language knowledge. For example, infants expect a familiar label uttered by an unfamiliar speaker (e.g., *shoe*) to refer to its conventional referent (a shoe) (Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, Cauley, & Gordon, 1987; Swingley, Pinto, & Fernald, 1998), expect novel labels to be conventional across different speakers (Buresh & Woodward, 2007; Graham, Stock, & Henderson, 2006; Henderson & Graham, 2005), and show surprise when interlocutors use false labels (Koenig & Echols, 2003).

What these studies do not address is whether children recognize that words from a foreign language belong to a distinct conventional system from native language words. One approach to this question has been to investigate children's ability to learn foreign language words. If children recognize that a foreign language is not part of their own conventional system, they might be less likely to learn these words. Empirical findings on this topic have been mixed. Some studies have found evidence of rapid foreign word learning by infants (Bijeljac-Babic, Nassurally, Havy, & Nazzi, 2009), whereas others have found that successful foreign word learning is modulated by language background (Akhtar, Menjivar, Hoicka, & Sabbagh, 2012) and vocabulary size (Koenig & Woodward, 2012). However, these studies cannot directly address whether children recognize that a foreign language is a distinct conventional system. Given their impressive word-learning skills, children could be successful whether or not they understand the nature of foreign language words (Koenig & Woodward, 2012). On the other hand, children could fail either because they reject foreign words

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