To share or not to share? Priming syntactic representations in young bilinguals

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A developmental approach to syntactic representations requires an understanding of how bilingual children process their two languages. In two cross-linguistic structural priming studies, we set out to investigate whether priming effects vary as a function of structural overlap, the effects of directionality on priming and if language proficiency predicts priming.

In Study 1 we primed attributive constructions; Study 2 targeted possessive constructions. 48 Polish-English bilingual children living in the UK took part. The experimenter provided a prime in one language and the child described the target in the other. Expressive vocabulary and sentence repetition tasks were administered in each language.

Study 1 found no significant effect of priming in either direction. Weak syntactic representations for RCs may have affected the parsing of the prime and/or the computation of the target. In Study 2, there was significant priming which did not differ by direction. This suggests that what is being primed is not a syntactic structure, but the word order of semantic role of possessor. Language proficiency did not significantly contribute to either model.

Thus, where constituent structure was not the same, priming of possessor-possessee word order nonetheless occurred where the two languages allowed the same alternation between the order of roles. However, we found no evidence that, in this sample, representations are shared when constituent structure was the same, i.e. Study 1. Children rarely produced non-standard syntactic forms suggesting that – for the most part - syntactic representations were not transferred incorrectly. Follow-on studies are investigating whether Polish-English bilingual speakers have abstract representations for these constructions and whether they do ultimately acquire shared representations.

[1] This is joint work with Katherine Messenger and Marta Wesierska (University of Warwick) and Vanessa Cieplinska (University of Reading)