The present paper concerns preliminary data from the first wave of a longitudinal project following language development from the second year through preschool. At present, our understanding of language development is informed largely by parent reports that provide rich, but highly contextualized, information (De Houwer, Bornstein, & Leach, 2005). We explore how an early, direct measure of word comprehension might inform our understanding of bilingual acquisition. The Computerized Comprehension Task (CCT) converges with parent estimates and accounts for unique variance in later language production (Friend, Schmitt, & Simpson, 2012). Its reliability and validity extend to French, English, and Spanish (Friend & Zesiger, 2011).

We report a comparison of French-English bilinguals with French and English monolinguals. Language status was confirmed using the Language Exposure Questionnaire (LEQ). This enabled us to determine relative exposure to French and English. We refer to children with greater exposure to French as French L1 and those with greater exposure to English as English L1. Forty-five English, sixty-six French, and thirty-four French-English children participated between 15 and 18 months of age. We administered the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory (MCDI: WG) and the CCT. Monolingual children were assessed once and bilingual children were assessed separately in L1 and L2.

English monolinguals scored 159.41 (σ = 62.93) on the MCDI and correctly identified 26% (σ=.17) of CCT items. French monolinguals scored 164.86 (σ=94.97) on the MCDI and identified 44% (σ=.15) of CCT items. Bilingual children with French L1 scored 164.85 (σ=94.97) on the French and 90.27 (σ =89.38) on the English MCDI. They identified 24% (σ =15) of the French and 25% of the English CCT items, (σ=.10). Children with English L1 scored 159.50 (σ=85.28) on the English and 164.86 (σ =94.96) on the French MCDI. They identified 29% (σ=.16) and 20% (σ=.09) English and French CCT items, respectively. Parents of English L1 children provided similar vocabulary estimates across L1 and L2 whereas parents of French L1 children reported an L1 advantage. In contrast, CCT scores reveal the opposite pattern: an L1 advantage for English but not for French.

Scatterplots of parent estimates on those MCDI items also assessed on the CCT revealed a positive trend with CCT scores across monolingual and bilingual samples. In contrast to full MCDI scores, these estimates revealed an L1 advantage for both English and French (see Figures 1 and 2).
To clarify this finding, we examined the influence of exposure to L1. Exposure to English L1 was negatively correlated with parent estimates on French MCDI items in common with the CCT ($r = -.54$, $p = .04$). A similar trend was also observed for French L1. Language exposure was not related to CCT scores. Whereas parent reports converge with child performance, the two approaches provide complementary perspectives on the progress of L1 and L2 acquisition.

We discuss symmetries and asymmetries between parent report and child performance with a focus on patterns of early acquisition in bilingual children. Our analyses explore development as a function of exposure to L1 and L2 and are informed by comparison with monolingual acquisition.

References


Figure 1. Parent Report and Child Performance in English L1 Children.

Figure 2. Parent Report and Child Performance for French L1 Children.