’Two tongues occupy my mouth’: Bilingualism’s Potential Effects on Children’s Pragmatic and Cognitive Abilities

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Abstract

In our globalized world, around two-thirds of children grow up in bilingual societies (Crystal, 1997). Despite the increasing number of bilingual speakers in the Arab world, and also despite the increasing evidence of bilingualism’s positive influence on human cognitive and pragmatic ability (e.g. Bialystok, 2011; Siegel, Matsuo & Pond, 2007), the consequences of bilingualism in the Middle East have not been adequately explored (Al Khatib, 2008). Bringing together the fields of pragmatics and cognitive development, this study investigates Arabic-monolingual and Arabic-and-English-bilingual children’s pragmatic-semantic competence using the English quantifiers most, some, and, and or and their Arabic equivalents. The study applies several language (pragmatic and semantic) and cognitive tasks; the results of a pilot study conducted on a limited sample reveal no significant differences between bilinguals and monolinguals in semantic performance, but find that bilingual children perform better than their monolingual counterparts on the two pragmatic tasks. The results also show that bilinguals perform significantly better than monolinguals on the inhibitory control task, the ‘Simon Task’. The findings of this research should enhance our understanding of the role speaking additional languages plays in improving children’s linguistic and cognitive abilities, which may in turn help us improve their school achievement.

About the Presenter:

Haifa is a PhD student, conducting a psycholinguistic research project under the supervision of Dr. Catherine Davies and Dr. Cecile De Cat. Her project explores the potential effect of bilingualism on children’s semantic-pragmatic competence of quantifiers. To achieve this empirically, the study applies a battery of language and cognitive tests; and theoretically, it attempts to explain its results in the light of certain theories of language processing. Haifa hopes her research will enhance our understanding of bilingualism’s impact on children’s pragmatic and cognitive abilities.