

The Acquisition of Cantonese Sentence-Final Particles in a Bimodal Bilingual Child: A Preliminary Exploratory Case Study

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Introduction

Sentence-final particles (SFPs) are important parts of colloquial Cantonese speech. Having a vast inventory and a wide spectrum of linguistic functions, SFPs can be complicated and challenging for children to acquire, especially for children with hearing loss. The current study aims to explore the acquisition of SFPs by a congenitally deaf child (WT), who acquires both Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) and Cantonese (HKC) (i.e., a bimodal bilingual). Through examining and comparing his developmental trajectory with his Cantonese monolingual and Cantonese-English bilingual peers in Hong Kong, it provides us insights into how language is acquired with input reduced in both quantity and quality.

Methodology

Utterances using Cantonese SFPs were extracted from three corpora, including the *Lee/Wong/Leung* Cantonese monolingual Corpus (Lee et al., 1991), the *Yip/Matthews* Cantonese-English unimodal bilingual Corpus (Yip & Matthews, 2007), and the Cantonese-HKSL bimodal bilingual corpus from the *Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies*. Since children can start using SFPs as soon as they enter the two-word stage (18 to 24 months), children with data starting before or from this period were preferred and selected for analysis to provide a comprehensive SFP developmental trajectory. Altogether, three children were selected from the monolingual and unimodal bilingual corpora, respectively; and one child (WT) was selected from the bimodal bilingual corpus due to the limited resources available. After extracting utterances including SFPs, each SFP was coded based on its time of emergence and acquisition. WT's SFP developmental trajectory was further compared with that of monolingual and bilingual children to investigate the distinct features of bimodal bilingual children's language development.

Results & Discussion

WT exhibited a protracted SFP development compared to his monolingual and bilingual peers. While monolingual and bilingual children produced their first SFP at around 20 months old, WT's first SFP did not emerge until 32 months old, showing a delayed onset time of acquiring SFP. Apart from that, WT's acquisition trajectory began with a distinct burst of SFP emergence, which is a pattern not evident in his peers. This accelerated phase seems to suggest that there might be a potential compensatory mechanism aimed at closing the developmental gap. Yet, after this bursting stage, his acquisition trajectory began to show a pattern that aligned more closely with his peers. The similarities and differences were further discussed in terms of language environment, language modality, and input proportion effects.

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Conclusion

The present study, drawing upon longitudinal data, examines children's acquisition of Cantonese SFPs. It offers preliminary insights into how hard-of-hearing children acquire language despite limited and low-quality input, shedding light on future bimodal bilingual acquisition research.

References

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