

Hebrew morphological knowledge of monolingual and bilingual kindergarten children

Gal Pedaal, MA student. Supervisor: Prof. Anat Prior

Research Topic: The study focuses on development of morphological knowledge in bilingual speakers of Hebrew, i.e., children who speak another language at home. Morphological knowledge, especially in a Semitic language such as Hebrew (Adam & Botvinick, 2012), is important for language comprehension and vocabulary development, which are crucial building blocks of literacy. Bilingual children have reduced exposure to the societal language, and thus might have significant delays in acquiring morphological structures compared to monolingual children. The current study compares the morphological knowledge of bilingual kindergarteners to that of their Hebrew monolingual peers, using four morphological tasks, two examining inflectional morphology and two involving derivational morphology. The bilingual and monolingual children were tested as part of the kindergarten cohort of the Safra longitudinal study.

Why is my study unique? Hebrew speaking children learn to use morphological structures and to execute generalizations that aid the learning of new words from around 3 years of age onward (Ben-Zvi & Levie, 2016). In older 5th grade children, Shahar-Yames et al. (2018) found bidirectional connections between vocabulary and morphological knowledge, which are influenced by input and learning. However, to date, no study has examined Hebrew morphological abilities of bilingual children in kindergarten across both inflectional and derivational morphology. Hence, my study is the first to comprehensively investigate both vocabulary and morphological knowledge in bilingual children, and thus will allow the early identification of gaps in morphological knowledge and accordingly lead to tailored interventions.

Analyses: To date, I identified all bilingual children in the Safra sample, according to the screening parent questionnaire, a total of 151 children. Subsequently, I wrote a detailed parental questionnaire on language practices and exposure of the children, oversaw its adaptation to a digital format, and received responses from ~100 families. Concurrently, I identified a matched sample of monolingual children (from the same classes as the bilingual children, matched on gender, SES, and cognitive abilities). My next steps include: a) comparing the bilingual and monolingual samples on vocabulary and morphology measures; b) in-depth error coding of the morphological tasks from the selected samples, to better characterize partial knowledge of children

from the two groups; c) analyses of links between exposure to Hebrew (as reported by parents) and morphological knowledge, in the bilingual children.

Education and clinical implications: The findings of the present study will provide important information about the morphological abilities of bilingual children before they enter elementary school. Findings of morphological and lexical gaps among bilingual kindergartners may predict later difficulties in reading acquisition. Early identification of such predictive relations has significant educational implications, by providing the evidence necessary for designing interventions aimed at improving morphological and lexical knowledge during kindergarten, targeted specifically at bilingual children who are at risk for underachievement in literacy. Such interventions may thus reduce difficulties in reading acquisition during elementary school.