

Crosslinguistic priming of syntactic and thematic roles: Evidence from Polish-English bilingual children

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What is the nature of syntactic and thematic representations in bilingual children's two languages? Are they shared cross-linguistically?

Structural priming evidence in adults suggests that:

- Proficient L2 learners can rely on shared syntactic structures [1]
- Thematic role ordering can be primed across languages [2, 3].

The evidence for shared syntax in bilingual children is more limited:

- Children show significant syntactic priming effects in one [4] or both directions [5].
- Children have shown word order, but not syntactic, priming [6].
- No evidence for whether bilingual children are sensitive to the priming of thematic roles instead of or alongside the priming of syntactic structure.

The current study

48 UK-based Polish-English bilinguals

- 26 girls; M_{age} 9;5, range: 7;11–11;4.
- vocabulary measured by WISC-V

Two sessions of a Snap! game

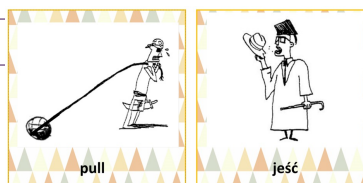
- 18 prime-target trials per condition:
 - baseline = first 18 trials
 - active, passive, (OVS) = mixed priming phase

Bidirectional crosslinguistic priming:

- English primes → Polish targets, *and*
- Polish primes → English targets

Stimuli

Pictures and primes



Active:

Pirat_[Agent] ciągnie_[V] piłkę_[Theme]

The pirate_[Agent] pulls_[V] the ball_[Theme]

Passive:

Piłka_[Theme] jest ciągnięta_[V] przez pirata_[Agent]

The ball_[Theme] is pulled_[V] by the pirate_[Agent]

OVS:

Piłkę_[Theme] ciągnie_[V] pirat_[Agent]

(The pirate pulls the ball)

Predictions

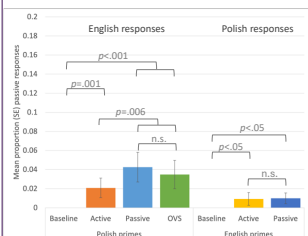
Syntactic priming:

- Children produce more passives in English/Polish after Polish/English passive primes.

Thematic role priming:

- Children produce more passives in English after Polish OVS primes.
- Children produce more OVS in Polish after English passive primes.

Results

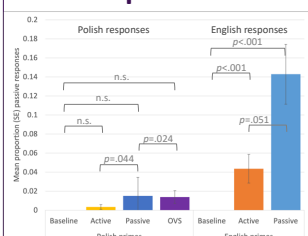


Both: more passives in *all* conditions in priming phase (inc. active) vs baseline.

English: same effect of OVS/passive primes vs active.

Polish: no effect of passive vs active primes.

Follow-up 1: within



48 UK-based bilinguals

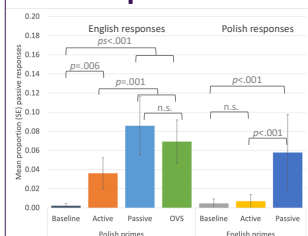
- 27 F; M_{age} 10;1, 8;0–12;4

Priming *within* languages.

English: more passives after primes vs baseline.

Polish: more passives after passive vs active/OVS.

Follow-up 2: adults



25 UK-based bilinguals

- 25 F; M_{age} 36;9, 19–59;9

Priming *between* languages

English: same pattern of results as children.

Polish: more passives after passive vs active/baseline.

Conclusions

- Crosslinguistic priming for syntactic structure and thematic role order.
- Crosslinguistic priming was bidirectional in adults but not children.
- Weak passives priming and OVS responses only in within language study – greater societal language competence? Contrasts with [2] results
- Items could be more conducive to passives.