

Do bilingual children acquire two languages like monolingual children?

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Children who are regularly exposed to two languages from birth are able to develop bilingual competence in early childhood. How do children become bilingual in the first few years of life? Do they develop like monolingual children acquiring the same two languages? This talk looks at the developmental trajectory of bilingual children acquiring Cantonese and English in Hong Kong and compares it with that of their monolingual counterparts.

Drawing on research in our book *The Bilingual Child* (2007) and an ongoing book project *Bilingual Development*, I will present evidence that bilingual children follow their own trajectory. Two languages are not a burden for a child, and proficiency can be achieved in both languages, though one language may develop ahead of the other. With developing knowledge of two languages, bilingual children are able to produce language forms and functions of stunning complexity as a result of integrating features from two grammars. I shall show how the two language systems interact with each other, reflecting language-specific as well as universal factors. Bilingual children have a distinct profile that defies a simple characterization as a composite of two monolinguals housed in the same mind.

The findings of our research are based on a large-scale multimedia corpus which documents the bilingual development of the six children from age one to four and a half. The corpus is the largest bilingual corpus in the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) archive. A range of phenomena will be illustrated with audio and video files, demonstrating the spontaneous speech of the bilingual children in real-life contexts.