

The Acquisition of Speech Rhythm in Bilingual Children

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This study investigates the acquisition of speech rhythm by Cantonese-English simultaneous bilingual children and their age-matched monolingual peers. Languages can be classified in terms of rhythmic characteristics that define English as stress-timed and Cantonese as syllable-timed. Few studies have examined the concurrent acquisition of rhythmically different languages in bilingual children. This study compares data from six Cantonese-English simultaneous bilingual children around 3;0 with six monolingual children in each language using recently developed acoustic rhythmic measures of consonantal, vocalic and syllabic intervals (additional data from around 2;6 is currently being analyzed.) Results show that monolingual children display distinct rhythmic patterns at 3;0, while the differences between the two languages of the bilingual children are less distinct: bilingual English has less durational variability than monolingual English. Bilingual children have a distinct phonological developmental trajectory from monolingual children, which is manifested in acquisition delay and is influenced by language dominance. These findings show that the bilingual child's two phonological systems interact at the prosodic level.