

Cognates boost bilingual infants' early lexical acquisition: A cross-linguistic CDI study

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Over the last decades, research has shown that simultaneous bilingual children's early vocabulary does not develop independently, but that mutual concepts, denoted by "translation equivalents", are important from the onset of lexical development (De Houwer et al., 2006; Bosch & Ramon-Casas, 2014). Recent work suggests that "cognates", phonologically similar forms denoting such mutual concepts boost lexical learning very early on: Toddlers learning similar languages containing many cognates show larger vocabularies in general (Flocchia et al., 2018) and cognate word pairs are known earlier than matched pairs of phonologically distant words (Mitchell et al., under review). However, to our knowledge, the present study is the first to investigate the role of the phonological similarity on the level of individual children and word form pairs. As part of a larger study, caregivers of 20 bilingual 18-month-olds filled in web-based receptive and productive vocabulary development questionnaire in French and English, (Swiss) German, Italian, Portuguese or Spanish, containing 461 translation equivalents (e.g. box-boîte-Dose-scatola-caixacaja). Phonological similarity of word forms across languages was rated via Kohnert et al.'s (2004) Cross-Linguistic Overlap Scale. We ran two mixed logistic regression models, for production and for comprehension, with random effects for participants and items over all word pairs (n=9038). Both show that knowledge of a word in French can be predicted from knowledge in the child's other language (p.10). This is evidence for a specific cognate boost on the individual item level. We are currently collecting data from the same children at 24 months for larger longitudinal analyses, also including further participant characteristics (e.g. exposure to each language, parental education). We will discuss methodological challenges as well as the importance of our findings for bilingual lexical acquisition, its mechanisms, and its assessment.