Review on Erika Csillingh's PhD dissertation

Conceptual Representation in the Speech Production of Bi- and Multilingual Children

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The dissertation focuses on conceptual representation and cross-linguistic influence (CLI) in the speech production of early bilingual and multilingual children. The relevance of the study is justified by its focus on a relatively under-researched participant group and language combinations, as well as by its choice of naturalistic speech data. Instead of examining isolated words or responses to experimental tasks, the author investigates how the participants use their languages when talking about their experiences in different linguistic and cultural contexts. This is an ambitious approach, because spontaneous speech is complex and it is not always easy to separate the possible sources of cross-linguistic influence. At the same time, I think this is one of the most valuable aspects of the dissertation.

I reviewed an earlier version of the dissertation for the in-house defence and made a number of suggestions concerning the research gap, the theoretical background, the methodological description, the comparison of the bilingual and multilingual cases, and the Discussion. I was pleased to see that the candidate took these remarks seriously. The final version is considerably more coherent and the contribution of the study is now much easier to identify. In the following, I will first briefly outline the main changes, referring to the relevant sections, and then discuss the strengths and some remaining limitations of the dissertation.

Changes made following the in-house defence

One of my main concerns was the Introduction, which previously gave a rather general overview of bilingualism without clearly establishing the particular research problem. The revised Section 1.1 now starts with bilingual language processing, cross-linguistic influence and conceptual representation. More importantly, Section 1.2 explicitly identifies the theoretical and empirical gaps. The empirical gap is discussed in relation to language combinations, participants, research methods and context. This makes the choice of English–Hungarian bilingual children and an English–French–Hungarian multilingual participant better motivated. I particularly appreciate this revision, because a doctoral dissertation should not only introduce an interesting topic but also show where and how the research contributes to previous knowledge. The research questions in Section 1.3 have also been reformulated and are more closely connected to the focus of the study, although the interpretation of the comparisons still needs to remain exploratory.

Chapter 2 has also been improved. In the earlier review I suggested reducing the emphasis on general definitions and adding more empirical research directly related to conceptual representation and CLI. The new Section 2.7 reviews empirical findings on representation, conceptual transfer and cross-linguistic influence, including research that demonstrates the role of cultural and linguistic experience in conceptual organisation. The discussion of the mental lexicon in Section 2.8 also gives more attention to the multilingual dimension, including the Trilingual Modified Hierarchical Model. This is a useful addition, as the dissertation does not deal exclusively with bilingual speakers. I also appreciate that the distinction between different types of partial conceptual equivalence has been clarified. Overall, the theoretical chapter now provides a strong

foundation for interpreting the results, rather than functioning mainly as a general introduction to bilingualism.

The methodological chapter has become more transparent. The discussion of case study methodology, previously included in the theoretical chapter, is now placed in Section 3.1. Sections 3.2 and 3.3 describe the participants and the collection of the speech samples, while Tables 1 and 2 provide the quantitative overview of the corpus. The recording durations, word counts and distribution of data across participants and languages are important information, particularly because the amount of data is not equal across the cases. Section 3.4 also introduces the analytical categories before the results are presented. The distinction between conceptual, lexical-semantic and structural transfer, code-switching and borrowing helps the reader follow the analyses in Chapters 4 and 5. These additions make the analytical procedure easier to evaluate.

In the earlier review it was suggested that the findings of the bilingual and multilingual cases should be brought together more systematically. The author decided to retain separate empirical chapters, Chapter 4 for the bilingual children and Chapter 5 for the multilingual participant. I can accept this choice, especially because the multilingual case involves additional analytical complexity. The important improvement is in Section 6.2, where the results are now compared directly. The summary table brings together different types of CLI, code-switching, domain specificity, monitoring and repair, and other phenomena. This gives the reader a much clearer picture of the similarities and differences across the cases than the earlier version did.

Another substantial change concerns Chapter 6. The revised chapter includes separate sections on the empirical findings (6.1), the comparison of bilingual and multilingual findings (6.2), and theoretical evaluation (6.3). The latter is particularly important because it explains more clearly what the two main theoretical frameworks contribute to the interpretation. Finally, Section 7.2 offers a more detailed discussion of the limitations, including the small sample, the unequal datasets, the interpretive nature of the analysis and the difficulty of drawing conclusions about cognitive processes from speech data alone. The addition of appendices and the lists of figures and tables has also improved the dissertation.

Overall evaluation of the dissertation

In my opinion, the main strength of the dissertation lies in the rich empirical material and the detailed, context-sensitive analysis of speech phenomena in Chapters 4 and 5. Csillingh makes good use of the participants' linguistic histories to explain how language use, dominance and context may influence speech production. This approach is particularly valuable for examining the Complementarity Principle and language mode, as it captures phenomena that would be difficult to observe through experimental tasks alone.

Another strength is the integration of two theoretical perspectives: Pavlenko's Modified Hierarchical Model, which addresses lexical-conceptual representations, and Grosjean's Language Mode framework, which accounts for language activation in different contexts. Although the study does not directly test these models, the findings provide valuable empirical observations that can be interpreted within these frameworks.

The inclusion of the multilingual case further adds to the value of the dissertation. As discussed in Section 6.2, similar types of cross-linguistic influence can be observed in bilingual and multilingual speech, but the involvement of three languages makes the possible sources of influence more complex.

I would also like to highlight the personal character of the research. The author has clearly invested considerable time in collecting, transcribing and analysing the interviews and in

understanding the linguistic biographies behind the examples. The result is not simply a catalogue of transfer phenomena but an account of how languages interact in the everyday experiences of particular children. At a time when AI-assisted academic writing is becoming increasingly common, I especially appreciate that the dissertation has a recognisable, personal scholarly voice.

In case of future publications, the following points should be considered. Claims about lexical retrieval, competition, conceptual activation or monitoring should remain cautious, as the study does not measure these processes directly. The comparison in Section 6.2 should be understood as a comparison of individual linguistic profiles rather than a general comparison between bilingualism and multilingualism. Some minor editorial problems also remain. For example, Table 12 appears in the description of Participant B but its caption refers to Participant A. Citation formatting should be checked for consistency in future publications (e.g. initials of authors first names should be eliminated). These are minor points and do not change my overall assessment of the dissertation.

In conclusion, I think the candidate has responded very well to the comments received at the in-house defence. The revised dissertation has a clearer research gap, a stronger connection between theory and empirical findings, a more transparent methodology and a much better developed Discussion. Its originality lies primarily in the detailed, context-sensitive analysis of conceptual representation and cross-linguistic influence in the spontaneous speech of early bilingual and multilingual children. The small number of participants limits generalisation, but this does not diminish the value of a carefully conducted exploratory case study. The dissertation presents valuable findings and opens up several possibilities for further research. On the basis of the above considerations, I consider the dissertation to meet the requirements of a PhD dissertation and recommend its acceptance for public defence.



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