Narrative language data from Ukrainian-Russian bilingual children as a challenge to language acquisition theories

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In the talk, we investigate Ukrainian-Russian bilingual children's narratives and the role of input on its acquisition. Our study is grounded on the multidimensional model of macrostructure (Gagarina et al. 2019a) that introduces the concepts of factual and inferred components in narrative construction, providing a nuanced understanding of how children develop storytelling abilities. In early narrative acquisition, children typically begin by constructing narrative structures from the straightforward factual components portrayed on the pictures. They gradually progress to incorporating the more cognitively complex inferred and evaluative components, which represent the protagonists' goals and internal states that must be deduced from the pictures. The integration of factual and inferred components ultimately leads to the acquisition of complete narrative episodes. This suggests that children, in their narrative acquisition, may undergo a process of self-organization, to some extent independent of parental input, until they develop more complex narrative skills.

On the other hand, extensive research also underscores the pivotal role of input in children's narrative development, particularly in bilingual contexts where input is divided between languages. Numerous studies have delved into various aspects of input in bilingual children, such as the quantity and quality of input, particularly parental input, and the effects of the age of language exposure (Pearson et al. 1997; Bitetti & Hammer 2016; Lindgren & Bohnacker 2022; Tribushinina et al. 2022; Lindgren et al. 2023; Yang et al. 2023).

Our study is based on the data collected from Ukrainian-Russian bilingual 6-9-year-old children (n=18) and their input providers (n=15) who relocated to Germany in 2022 as a result of the Russian aggression. The data were collected with the help of the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) (Gagarina et al. 2012). Picture sequences, provided in MAIN, were used to elicit four narratives per participant: two in Ukrainian and two in Russian. We assessed narrative macrostructure of children and their input providers based on story structure, complexity, and internal state terms, using MAIN's Russian and Ukrainian scoring guidelines (Gagarina et al. 2019b; 2019c). Furthermore, we calculated the amount of input in both languages using a questionnaire adapted from the Questionnaire for Parents of Bilingual Children (PaBiQ) (Tuller 2015), with additional questions meant to reflect the bilingual context in Ukraine.

Our research addresses two questions:

1. Does the quantity of input have an effect on the development of children's narrative skills?

2. Assuming that the narrative skills of parents can provide insights into the quality of parental input, we ask whether there is a correlation between the narrative skills of the children and their input providers?

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