

Formal and semantic gender cues in the acquisition of German in German-Russian bilinguals

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The study investigates the role of formal and semantic cues in the acquisition of grammatical gender in German acquired as an early L2 by German-Russian bilingual children. It is well known that children make use of formal (phonological and morphological) cues from a relatively early age, even when natural gender cues are also available (e.g., Karmiloff-Smith 1979 for French, Bottari et al. 1993/94 for Italian, Kuchenbrandt 2005, Perez-Pereira 1991 for Spanish, Rodina & Westergaard 2015 for Russian). Artificial language learning experiments confirm that children are biased to attend to formal rather than semantic cues (Culbertson 2018). However, most evidence, so far, comes from languages with transparent assignment systems.

Gender assignment in German is semi-transparent. There are formal cues with a high reliability (e.g. dysyllabic nouns ending in *-e* tend to be feminine), nouns for which the assigned gender is based on semantic properties (e.g., alcoholic beverages tend to be masculine), and nouns for which gender assignment is opaque. Whether or not German-learning children prioritize formal over semantic cues or vice versa has been discussed controversially (cf. Wegener 1995 vs. Mills 1986, Szagun et al. 1997). The goal of the current study is to find out whether bilinguals rely on semantic cues to a higher degree than monolingual children do, because they have to master two different assignment systems with different degrees of formal transparency.

The study is based on an experiment with martian-like characters whose appearance suggests that they are either male or female. Each character is introduced with a nonce noun whose ending cued for one particular gender. There were four conditions: Nouns in condition 1 and 2 formally cued for feminine gender (e.g. *Fruxe*, a noun ending in a schwa), but in condition 1 (FF), the noun was introduced together with a female-looking character and in condition 2 with a male-looking character (FM). Conditions 3 and 4 contained nouns that were formally biased towards masculine (e.g. *Schlomp*), in harmony with the natural gender cue or clashing with the natural gender cue. After the experiment, the children were asked which of the characters they thought were boys or girls to ensure they associated them with the intended gender. 55 bilingual German-Russian children (ages 3–8) and 15 monolingual German were tested. The results showed children were more sensitive to phonological cues than to semantic cues. At the same time, semantic cues played a role, as assignment was more successful when formal and semantic cues coincided.