

Structural complexity reduction in early bilingual event encoding: Evidence from caused motion descriptions

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Previous research on the L1 acquisition of motion event expression suggests that mapping multiple semantic components onto syntactic units is associated with greater difficulties in verb-framed than in satellite-framed languages (e.g., Allen *et al.*, 2007; Hickmann *et al.*, 2018), because the former require more complex structures (using subordination). This study investigates the impact of this language-specific difference in simultaneous English-French bilingual children's caused motion expressions. As part of an elicited production task, 2L1 children (N = 96) between four and ten years and age-matched monolingual English and French children (N = 96) described video animations portraying caused motion events involving multiple semantic components. Analyses focused on the rates of complex packaging patterns, involving at least one subordinate clause. Results revealed asymmetric divergences from monolingual children: In their French descriptions, bilingual children made significantly less use of complex structures than monolingual peers, while their English responses aligned quantitatively with monolinguals. This effect was most robust in older children (aged 10 years). Furthermore, the likelihood of using complex structures was strongly predicted by the semantic density of responses, but this relationship between semantic and syntactic complexity pertained exclusively in French. The findings are argued to indicate crosslinguistic influence as a task-specific syntactic relief strategy and are discussed with reference to current theoretical proposals regarding bilingual optimisation strategies (Muysken, 2013; Toribio, 2013) and universal syntactic biases of event encoding (Beavers *et al.*, 2010).