Multicompetence and Native Speaker Variation in Construal of Manner in Mandarin

Native speakers exhibit systematic variation across many linguistic domains as a function of a variety of sociolinguistic variables (e.g. Chambers Trudgill, & Schilling-Estes, 2004). This paper investigates whether native language variation also exists as a result of multicompetence, i.e. knowledge of two languages in one mind (Cook, 1992), and concludes that bilingual Mandarin-English speakers are distinct from monolingual speakers of Mandarin with respect to construal of manner of motion in speech and gesture in their native language.

Recent studies have supported the existence of a three-way typological distinction in motion event expression between satellite-framed languages, e.g. English; verb-framed languages, e.g. Japanese; and equipollently-framed languages, e.g. Mandarin, (Brown & Chen, 2013; Chen & Guo, 2010; Chui, 2009, 2012; Guo & Chen, 2009; Slobin, 2004). Such cross-linguistic typological patterning raises the question of how differences in conceptual representations are reconciled when individuals acquire a second language. With respect to construal of manner of motion, i.e. the way a protagonist moves - roll, jump, some research has argued that one’s native language (L1) shapes the development of a second language (L2) in speech (e.g. Cadierno, 2010; Inagaki, 2002; Hohenstein et al. 2006; Montrul, 2001) and gesture (e.g. Negueruela et al, 2006; Stam, 2010), while other research has suggested that the relationship between the L1 and L2 is bidirectional and that development of an L2 may influence one’s L1 (Brown & Gullberg, 2008).

Narrative descriptions of motion were elicited in the L1 from native Mandarin-speaking second language users of English (n=12) at an intermediate, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) B level of L2 proficiency, and from monolingual speakers of Mandarin (n=14) and English (n=13). Analyses of speech, specifically the extent to which manner was explicitly mentioned, revealed no differences between bilingual and monolingual production in L1 Mandarin. However, analyses of construal of manner in gesture revealed a distinction between bilingual and monolingual L1 production in the degree of semantic overlap between speech and gesture, with bilingual speakers of Mandarin patterning more like monolingual speakers of English by marking Manner in both speech and accompanying iconic hand gestures significantly more often than monolingual speakers of Mandarin. Additional analyses triangulating data from bilingual Japanese-English and monolingual Japanese speakers suggest that native language performance among bilingual speakers is influenced by properties of the second language, English, specifically in the use of “manner-highlighting gestures”.

The study supports growing evidence of variation in native language production as a result of multicompetence, of the complex inter-relationships between an L1 and L2, and of the benefits of gesture analysis, which may provide a wider lens through which the relationships between languages in the bilingual mind may be observed.

References


