

Documenting the language abilities of ‘left-behind’ ethnic minority children in China: evidence from Kam-Mandarin bilingual children’s comprehension of relative clauses

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According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2017), there are more than 15 million of so-called ‘left-behind’ children in China, who are primarily taken care of by their grandparents instead of their parents. ‘Left-behind’ children refer to those who are left in rural areas while their parents work in urban regions. Thus far, there is very little published research documenting the learner language characteristics of this unique group of children. Studying their language development allows us to address important issues in child language acquisition, for instance, how variations in culture and language affect language development in children.

We present the first experimental study investigating the comprehension of relative clauses (RCs) in Kam-Mandarin bilingual children. Forty-two children aged 5;11-10;3 from a minority Kam village in Mainland China were tested on their comprehension of head-final subject and object RCs in both Kam (L1) and Mandarin (L2) with a picture-pointing task.

The children in general showed a subject over object preference in both languages, a pattern consistent with the existing literature on bi- and tri-lingual Mandarin-speaking children. These children found object head-final RCs in Kam significantly more difficult than those in Mandarin, even though Kam was their first language and the stronger language for the younger group. Children’s knowledge of Mandarin (measured by their Mandarin vocabulary scores) positively predicted their accuracy in comprehending Kam object head-final RCs, and negatively predicted their error rates when comprehending Kam object head-final RCs. We therefore argue for a specific case of backward L2-to-L1 positive transfer in the younger group of bilinguals, despite Kam being their stronger language.

This study is empirically and theoretically significant. Empirically, it features an under-studied language, Kam, which not only attests the typologically rare combination of SVO canonical word order and head-final RCs, but also instantiates both head-final RCs and head-initial RCs. Theoretically, these word order properties bear on the theme of competition between constructions (Chan, Chen, Matthews & Yip, 2017; Kidd, Chan & Chiu, 2015; Rowland, Noble & Chan, 2014). We will also address the following conceptual issues: (i) the issue of subject/object asymmetry in languages attesting the rare combination of SVO order and head-final RCs; (ii) the nature of difficulty in comprehending object RCs in Kam versus Mandarin; and (iii) the possibility, nature and directionality of cross-linguistic influence in these bilingual children, given the structural overlaps (Hulk & Müller, 2000).

Selected example stimuli:

	Subject RC	Object RC
Mandarin	na yi ge shi [qin gongji de laoshu] ? 'Which one is [the mouse that is kissing the cock]?'	na yi ge shi [laoshu tui de xiaoya] ? 'Which one is [the duck that the mouse is pushing]?'
Kam	teja nəu ɛi: [pu kaɪ li no:]? 'Which one is [the mouse that is kissing the cock]?'	teja nəu ɛi: [meu wa li pən] ? 'Which one is [the duck that the cat is feeding]?'

Selected references:

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- Rowland, C., Noble, C. & Chan, A. (2014). Competition all the way down: How children learn word order cues to sentence meaning. In B. MacWhinney, A. Malchukov & E. A. Moravcsik (eds), *Competing Motivations in Grammar and Usage* (pp.127-143). Oxford University Press.