

The Acquisition of Cantonese Tones in Cantonese-English Bilingual Children

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This study investigates the longitudinal tonal development of three Cantonese-English bilingual children aged 2;0 to 3;4, 1;8 to 3;0 and 3;1 to 4;6 respectively. The utterances produced by the children were taken from the multimedia Hong Kong Bilingual Child Language Corpus (Yip and Matthews, 2007). We compare our bilingual children's tonal development with monolingual children in terms of (1) age of first emergence of tones, (2) age of stabilization (accuracy measure) and (3) acquisition order of tones.

Previous studies showed that Cantonese-speaking monolingual children normally master their tonal system by the age of two in both longitudinal studies (So and Dodd, 1995; Tse, 1978) and cross-sectional studies (So and Dodd, 1995), although some studies reported that the low rising tone is still not acquired at the age of three (Tse, 1992). Regarding the acquisition order of tones, these studies show that tones in the high register are generally acquired earlier than tones in the low register, and level tones are acquired earlier than contour tones. Law (2006) investigated the tonal development of an English dominant Cantonese-English bilingual child and reported that a longer period was needed for a complete mastery of the Cantonese tonal system in bilingual children due to prosodic transfer from English.

Our empirical findings show that the stabilization of the Cantonese tonal system by the bilingual children was observed at age 3;7, using the 66.7% accuracy criterion. The acquisition order of tones follows a similar hierarchy as in Cantonese monolingual children. With respect to the errors made by the bilingual children, the mid-level tone (tone 3) seems to be an unmarked tone which was used frequently by the children to substitute the target tones. Theoretical issues related to the under-differentiation of the Cantonese tonal system by bilingual children will be discussed. In the literature on phonological acquisition, consonant and vowel harmony are frequently used to explain the segmental errors produced by the children. In this study, tonal harmony is proposed to account for some of the error patterns at the prosodic level.

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