

The University of Hong Kong  
Department of Psychology

*Departmental Seminar*

***Cross-language Development of Syntactic and Reading Skills  
among Chinese-English Bilingual Students***

Date: August 20, 2015 (Thursday)  
Time: 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.  
Venue: Room 813, 8/F, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU  
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The ever-expanding bilingual population worldwide has fuelled research on how a first (L1) and a second language (L2) interact to impact bilinguals' language and reading development. In this seminar, I will discuss my findings on bilinguals' syntactic skills in L1 Chinese and in typologically distant L2 English, and their cross-language interactions with reading development.

Study 1 was a two-year longitudinal study in which 198 grade 1 and 203 grade 3 Hong Kong Chinese-English bilinguals participated. Study 1A focused on the contrasting roles of morphosyntactic and word order skills in L1 Chinese and L2 English reading across grades. Results showed that reading comprehension was differentially dependent on the two syntactic skills across ages and languages. Word order, relative to morphosyntactic skill, was critical to understanding texts at an earlier time. Word order was also more important to reading in Chinese, whereas reading in English gradually relied more on morphosyntactic skill. Study 1B used structural equation modelling to study the cross-language relationships. Mediation analyses revealed that L1 Chinese syntactic skills cross-linguistically predicted L2 English reading comprehension one year later;

this prospective association was largely mediated by L2 English syntactic skills among the fourth graders. Furthermore, word order skill was more transfer-ready than morphosyntactic skill, indicating an effect of linguistic distance upon the language transfer.

Beyond a mere cross-language syntactic transfer, Study 2 asked if bilinguals' dual-language experience promoted further syntactic advancement via enhancing sensitivity to underlying syntactic structures. Participants in Study 2 comprised three age cohorts, including 69 primary school children, 56 secondary school adolescents, and 73 undergraduate adults. Across the three cohorts, the Chinese-English bilinguals outperformed their English monolingual peers in learning novel syntactic patterns and processing morphosyntax specific to English. The bilingual adults also performed better than their monolingual peers in manipulating language-specific word order. Hence, Study 2 supports the structural sensitivity hypothesis that bilinguals' advantage is not confined to knowledge and strategies specific to the additional language, but constitutes a more abstract representation of linguistic structures in general.

The findings collectively suggest how syntactic and reading skills can be honed in a bilingual learning context. Teachers may evoke L1 syntactic knowledge and map it onto L2 corresponding structures to enhance L2 reading. Building up L2 proficiency is also essential because it is the prerequisite for reaping the bilingual benefits in maximising L2 learning. In sum, skilled L2 reading necessitates a careful consideration of the cross-language syntactic development.