



Representations of L1 and L2 Words in Preschool Children's Mental Lexicon

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Abstract

This study explores the interaction between native and foreign language in the mind of preschool children, at an early stage of their L2 development. It addresses the issue of the extent of correspondence between the representations of equivalent L1 and L2 words as well as the question whether the structure of the words' representations is affected by widening of the word's usage context. The study was carried out with a group of thirty 6-year-old children, all native speakers of Croatian who have all been learning English for a year in the same preschool setting. The subjects' task was to assess the meaning of the set of words that are considered to be lexical equivalents in their L1 (Croatian) and their L2 (English) on a 4 point Semantic differential scale, specifically adapted for this purpose, before and after being exposed to some learning activities. The obtained results are discussed in the light of classical compound/coordinate/subordinate division of bilingual speakers as well as Paradis' integrated model of neurolinguistic organisation. In accordance with the starting hypothesis, a significant level of correspondence between semantic profiles of the examined L1 and L2 lexical equivalents were found, indicating a high degree of overlapping of the L1 and L2 representations' systems already at this early stage of L2 development. The results of the study also show that regardless of the language (L1 or L2), introducing words to a wider context to some extent changes the profile of the words' mental representations, increasing the level of their integration into speakers' mental lexicons.

Keywords: *mental lexicon, L1 and L2, words' representations, preschool children.*

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