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On the consequences of early multiple-language exposure: a study of Korean-American heritage bilinguals

For a variety of theoretical and methodological reasons, bilinguals are understudied in mainstream linguistics, despite making up over half the world's population of speakers (Crystal, 1997). In this talk I will present the results of production-perception study of Korean monolinguals, American English monolinguals, and Korean-American heritage bilinguals (children schooled in the US and exposed to both languages from early childhood). The production study (Oh & Daland, 2011ab) showed that the phonological contrast systems of English and Korean are faithfully reflected in the phonetics of bilinguals' stops. Phonetically, bilinguals' stops differed in fine-grained details, though some of the differences may have resulted from language change in Peninsular Korean (Silva, 2006), rather than from intraspeaker language transfer. The perception study compared the intelligibility of bilingual talkers to monolingual talkers in both languages. In both English and Korean, native listeners found bilingual talkers at least as intelligible as monolingual talkers. Heritage bilinguals were actually more intelligible in Korean than monolinguals, but this was probably a task effect (i.e. heritage speakers may have hyperarticulated in the production study, since they are unused to reading Hangeul aloud). The results suggest two important points about the consequences of early multiple-language exposure: (1) contra Kang & Guion (2006), heritage bilinguals *do* differ from monolinguals in production, so they cannot be modeled simply as possessing two monolingual grammars, and (2) there is no production 'penalty' for being bilingual, i.e. heritage bilinguals acquire the same functional contrast system as monolinguals, and the subtle phonetic differences they exhibit do not impede speech perception in non-bilingual listeners.

REFERENCES


