

# **BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

## **Vocabulary and Metalinguistic Awareness of Monolingual and Bilingual Preschool Children**

TAMARA GOLDSTEIN

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## ABSTRACT

### Vocabulary and **metalinguistic awareness of monolingual and bilingual preschool children**

Awareness to the formal structure of language has been a widely studied issue in bilingualism literature, but its association to vocabulary acquisition has only rarely been investigated. The present study evaluated the impact of three metalinguistic awareness abilities, morphological, syntactic and lexical awareness, on vocabulary comprehension and production of nouns and verbs. The participants in the study were 5-6 year old's preschool children with typical language development: 32 monolingual children, 17 Russian-Hebrew simultaneous bilingual children and 21 Russian-Hebrew sequential bilingual children. Tasks of morphological, lexical and syntactic awareness were developed and administered in L2/Hebrew, along with measures of vocabulary knowledge in L1/Russian and L2/Hebrew. Even though both languages were taken into account, bilingual children still underperformed in all four vocabulary tasks compared to their age matched monolingual peers, with sequential bilinguals lagging behind simultaneous bilinguals in L2. A qualitative analysis of the answers on the noun and verb production task revealed a significant difference between sequential bilingual and monolingual children, with monolinguals producing more errors closer to the semantic field (e.g., synonyms) as opposed to sequential bilinguals, who made more errors further from the semantic field of the expected word (e.g., y associative and perceptual errors). Metalinguistic differences were found only in the morphological awareness task, with monolinguals and simultaneous bilinguals outperforming sequential bilinguals. Amongst monolinguals, receptive vocabulary accounted for 20% of the variance in syntactic awareness ability. In a stepwise regression, the theoretical assumption for bilingual children was that vocabulary knowledge in L1 can be used to predict metalinguistic awareness abilities which in

turn can be used to predict vocabulary knowledge in L2. The predictions were not found for L1 but L2, metalinguistic abilities served as a strong predictor of vocabulary scores in L2, with lexical awareness predicting 41.3% of the variance amongst sequential bilinguals. It may be that metalinguistic abilities in bilingual children are enabled through enhanced control and are simultaneously influenced by formal linguistic knowledge. Theoretical explanations and implications regarding bidirectional associations between the different metalinguistic abilities and vocabulary knowledge are discussed.