

Acquiring /l/ in a multidialectal context by English-Malay bilingual children in Singapore

SIM, Jasper H. & POST, Brechtje. *University of Cambridge*.

Phonological acquisition in multidialectal contexts can be complicated by heterogeneity in the input. In pluralistic communities, children may be faced with alternative variants of a phoneme not only in the child-directed speech of their caregivers, but also in the competing input models of other significant adults/peers in the broader community^[1,2,3]. This present study investigates the acquisition of English and Malay laterals by English-Malay simultaneous bilingual preschoolers in Singapore who were exposed to several allophones of /l/. Their caregivers used predominantly clear-l in English (an ethnic marker) and Malay, but their English coda /l/ can also be inconsistently and variably L-less (vocalised/deleted) and in formal contexts, velarised^[3]. The input model they receive at home can further be in contrast with the variety spoken by the Chinese ethnic majority, whose English coda /l/ is typically L-less. We examined the development of their English and Malay lateral systems and the social/language-external factors that modulate their production patterns.

The participants included ten English-Malay bilingual children between ages of 3;8 to 5;8. Information about factors that modulate their bilingual experience, including the amount use of Malay (6–43%), socio-economic status, peer group type (Malay only [n=5] or Malay+Chinese [n=5]), exposure to teachers/peers of other ethnicities in their preschool (Malay only [n=6] or mixed [n=4]), and caregivers' language dominance was collected. Laterals in all word positions were elicited by their caregiver using picture cards and through an information gap activity, during which the child had to help their mother match puzzle pieces by giving structured clues (e.g., *Lina is passing a baLL*). The final dataset comprised 352 English laterals and 220 Malay laterals. Laterals were analysed acoustically and auditorily for their realisations at the coda position (i.e., L-less or retained) and for retained laterals in all positions, their phonetic quality (i.e., darkness).

Mixed-effects regression analyses revealed that the retained English and Malay laterals in all word positions were clear-l and were not significantly different in their darkness. In other words, all the Malay children had acquired the ethnically distinctive use of English coda clear-l, regardless of their amount of use of Malay. However, while all children retained most of their Malay coda laterals, they differed in how frequently they vocalised/deleted their English coda /l/: children who had only Malay close friends retained most of their English /l/ like they did for their Malay /l/, regardless of language dominance/use. By contrast, those who had close ethnically Chinese friend(s) were significantly more likely to vocalise/delete their English coda /l/ than their Malay coda /l/.

The overarching preference for English clear-l by children who were exposed to a largely homogenous input model from caregivers and peers suggests that they could have regularised their English input^[4], by opting for the most frequent and acoustically salient clear variant, and ignoring variable L-lessness in English. Contrastingly, the predominantly L-less model of Chinese children could have facilitated the attainment of the adult target in the Malay children with ethnically Chinese close friends, through the presentation of linguistic input that is more consistently L-less. The findings show how properties of the input, general learning mechanisms and social factors are all operative in determining the outcomes of bilingual phonological acquisition in a plural society.

[1] Mayr, R., & Montanari, S. (2015). Cross-linguistic interaction in trilingual phonological development: The role of the input in the acquisition of the voicing contrast*. *Journal of Child Language*, 42(5), 1006–1035. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000914000592>

[2] Sharma, D. (2011). Style repertoire and social change in British Asian English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 15(4), 464–492. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2011.00503.x>

[3] Sim, J. H. (2021). Sociophonetic variation in English /l/ in the child-directed speech of English-Malay bilinguals. *Journal of Phonetics*, 88, 101084. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wocn.2021.101084>

[4] Hudson Kam, C. L., & Newport, E. L. (2005). Regularizing Unpredictable Variation: The Roles of Adult and Child Learners in Language Formation and Change. *Language Learning and Development*, 1(2), 151–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15475441.2005.9684215>