Development of narrative skills in a bilingual context: challenges and advantages

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The complexity of factors which have an impact on (bilingual) language acquisition and the absence of acquisition standards for bilingualism lead to difficulties in assessing bilingual children with problems, thus increasing the possibility of misdiagnosis of children with language difficulties due to bilingualism, for children with SLI1 [1]. In the first part of the talk, I will present COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action IS0804 “Language Impairment in a Multilingual Society: Linguistic Patterns and the Road to Assessment” which aimed at improving language assessment of minority language children. The primary objectives of the Action were as follows:

1) to disentangle bilingualism and SLI by establishing the relative contribution of each;
2) to show how SLI can be identified in both of a child's languages;
3) to explore the extent to which the manifestations of SLI are similar or different across languages in the same child;
4) to establish whether the nature and severity of SLI is affected by the child's acquisition of more than one language [2].

In the second part of the talk, I will focus on the narrative analysis which is increasingly considered by researchers and clinicians to be an ecologically valid way to investigate communicative competence [1]. During the Action, the MAIN (Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives, [1]) was developed and piloted with more than 550 monolingual and bilingual children aged 3 to 10, for 15 different languages and language combinations. I will present briefly the methodology of the MAIN and the results of the pilot study.

The study was based on experimental data of two samples (N1=12; N2=12) which represent typically developing Lithuanian children (mean age 74 months):

1) living in Lithuania and attending state kindergarten daily;
2) living in UK and additionally to state school attending Lithuanian language tutor center (4 hours per week). The stories were recorded, transcribed and annotated using CHILDES tools. During the analysis, the main micro- and macrostructural indications (including general productivity, lexical diversity, syntactic complexity, cohesion and coherence) of the narratives were evaluated. The results indicated the main tendencies of Lithuanian narrative production in monolingual and bilingual samples and highlighted differences between the samples. Generally, it can be stated that Lithuanian TD monolinguals (with a few exceptions) demonstrated much better developing lexical skills and syntactic devices of story coherence in comparison to the bilinguals; however, general productivity of the stories was similar in both samples.
