Do bilingual children lag behind?

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For some researchers, the answer to this question is a clear 'Yes' (e.g. Bialystok, 2009; Hoff et al. 2012). The 'bilingual delay' has been attributed to reduced exposure and use - given that a bilingual child receives less input in each of her languages and practices each of her languages less than a monolingual child – in line with exposure-based approaches to language acquisition.

Other researchers (e.g. Grosjean 2010, Meisel, 2013) answer the above question with an equally strong 'No', arguing instead that bilingual first language acquisition is basically identical to monolingual L1 acquisition – in line the robustness of the child's innate ability to learn language irrespective of variation in the input.

This controversy seems far from resolved. Previous research on the topic has almost exclusively examined bilingual children's behavioural output, mostly their spoken productions and their developmental patterns. By contrast, research on the processes involved in how bilingual children encode and produce words and sentences in real time is extremely scarce.

To achieve more detailed insights into bilingual children's language production, I will report results from one of our large-scale studies on the topic in which we examined both children's final spoken output and mechanisms of encoding and planning their productions, the latter by means of ERPs. ERPs represent a continuous series of positive and negative voltage changes in the ongoing electroencephalogram and provide a detailed measure of on-line language processing with a temporal resolution in the millisecond range. For this study, we investigated bilingual children's encoding and production of morphologically complex words, specifically regular vs. irregular past-tense forms in English and corresponding past participle forms in German.

We did indeed find evidence for a bilingual delay, but a *selective* one only that affects irregular (lexical restricted) morphology. Crucially, however, grammatical computation and the mechanisms of morphological encoding were not delayed in bilingual children.