

The development of plural-marking expressions in Malay-English bilingual child

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Abstract

The present study investigates the development of plural-marking expressions in a child raised in Malay and English over a six-month period, from age 3 year 4 months (3;4) up to 3 year 10 months (3;10). The Malay-English language pair is interesting because of the remarkably different linguistic mechanisms used for encoding plurality in the two languages; morphologically, Malay marks plurality through distinct forms of reduplication such as *rumah-rumah* ‘houses’, *buah-buahan* (plural form of *buah* ‘fruit’) and *bukit-bukau* ‘hills’ (Sew, 2007). In contrast, English uses morphological inflections *-s* suffixed to the stem, e.g., *cat/cats*, *dog/dogs*, *book/books* (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002). To examine the child’s development in each language, she is audio and video recorded for 30 minutes weekly in separate Malay and English sessions. This study addresses the following question; since plurality is expressed differently in each language, how does the child develop the two systems? Results suggest that though the expressions of plurality are distinct between Malay and English, the two developing grammars also manifest interaction. Thus, for instance iteration, which the child uses to express plurals predominantly in Malay context, is also used in English context. Iteration is a strategy in which the child pluralizes more-than-one objects by repeating the lexical items based on the number of entities (hence four cats would be *cat cat cat cat*). Likewise, the English plural *-s* which the child uses frequently in English context (e.g. *cats, dogs*), also appeared occasionally in Malay context (e.g. *mainans* ‘toys’).

References

- Carstairs-McCarthy, A. (2002). *An introduction to English morphology: Words and their structure*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Sew, J. W. (2007). *Reduplicating nouns and verbs in Malay: a conceptual analysis*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya press.