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CUHK

語言學及現代語言系

Department of Linguistics and
Modern Languages

The Effect of Bilingual Experience on Children's Word Learning Biases

Professor Zhuang WU
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Date: April 21, 2026 (Tuesday)

Time: 3:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. (Hong Kong Time, UTC +8)

Venue: Room 101, Leung Kau Kui Building,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



Abstract

This lecture explores how early bilingual experience shapes the cognitive strategies children employ when learning new words. Decades of research on monolingual children have identified robust word learning biases, such as the Mutual Exclusivity Bias—the assumption that a new label refers to a novel object rather than one already having a name. However, children growing up bilingual are immersed in a linguistic environment where translation equivalents (two words for the same object) are common, and the form-to-meaning mapping is more flexible.

We will review key evidence demonstrating that bilingual children, compared to their monolingual peers, exhibit a reduced reliance on the Mutual Exclusivity assumption. This difference is evident from as early as toddlerhood and reflects bilinguals' adaptation to a more complex naming landscape. The discussion will delve into the underlying cognitive mechanisms, suggesting that bilingual experience enhances executive function skills (e.g., cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control) and fosters a metalinguistic awareness that objects can be referred to in multiple ways.

Furthermore, we will examine how bilingualism influences other biases. Evidence suggests bilingual children may demonstrate a more adaptable and context-sensitive application of these biases.

Ultimately, this lecture will argue that bilingual experience does not create a deficit in word learning but rather reorganizes the foundational strategies for vocabulary acquisition. Bilingual children develop a unique, flexible approach to mapping words to the world, offering profound insights into the plasticity of the language-learning mind and challenging theories of lexical development built primarily on monolingual data.

Speaker

Wu Zhuang is a professor at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and serves as Dean of the Faculty of English Language and Culture. His research primarily focuses on language acquisition, with a particular interest in the mechanisms underlying children's lexical-semantic development, as well as their acquisition of syntactic-pragmatic interfaces such as information structure. He has led and completed two projects funded by the National Social Science Foundation of China. He is the author of two monographs and one translation, and has published over 30 research articles.

All Are Welcome

Enquiries

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