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The multilingual advantage of L1 and L2 learners in the acquisition of French subjects: Insights from a generative perspective

Research on multilingual first language (L1) acquisition has shown acceleration in various linguistic domains, including subject realization and subject position in French (Arnaus Gil & Müller 2018, Arnaus Gil et al. 2021, Scalise et al. 2021). Bilingual children omit subjects less frequently than their monolingual peers (Figure 1), which is explained within the generative framework by the relative location of the (non-)null-subject property within parameter hierarchies (Biberauer et al. 2014): In a marked non-null-subject language (NNSL) like French, allowing subject omission only with individual verbs, parametrization occurs late. Assuming that parameters are not duplicated in multilinguals (MacSwan 2000, Müller 2024), another less marked L1 (e.g., a partial or consistent NSL) potentially leads to earlier and simultaneous parametrization in *all* the multilinguals' languages.

Phonologically, bilinguals produce fewer prenominal fillers in form of subminimal words than monolinguals (Yamaguchi et al. 2021, D'Aurizio et al. 2023). If the Prosodic Hierarchy (Selkirk 1984) is another non-duplicated component in multilingual language acquisition (Stahnke 2022a), bilinguals' early knowledge of another L1 providing unambiguous evidence for prosodic structuring may accelerate the realization of fully-fledged (bimoraic) subject pronouns in form of prosodic feet when compared to monolinguals of French, where the existence of feet is debated (Andreassen & Eychenne 2013, Wauquier & Yamaguchi 2013, Özçelik 2017). As newborns and infants are highly sensitive to prosodic (especially rhythmic) cues (Mehler et al. 1988, Nazzi et al. 1998, Guasti 2004: 23-40, Skoruppa et al. 2009, Stahnke 2022b), phonological bootstrapping of syntax has been confirmed (Christophe et al. 1997, 2003, 2008, Guasti 2004: 90-94, Höhle 2009).

These findings suggest that, firstly, L1 acquisition cannot be solely explained by maturation under a continuity perspective (e.g., Radford 1990), and secondly, the observed acceleration effect is caused by specific linguistic (instead of general cognitive) knowledge. An important question following from these conclusions is how the acceleration effect can be ideally exploited for learning and teaching further languages (L2s) in child- and adulthood. If the multilingual advantage is primarily linguistically determined, it should in principle be possible to (re-)activate this type of abstract knowledge beyond critical periods (Meisel 2009).

L2 learners could make use of existing cognitive subroutines of already acquired L1 phenomena (and corresponding parametric decisions). In this way, critical periods could be overcome or compensated for in L2 acquisition.

A practical asset of this argument is that frequency viz. the quantity of linguistic input in the L2 is secondary because learners draw on readily available implicit knowledge of their L1s, which theoretically addresses the problem of (in)sufficient amount of formal L2 instruction. What seems to be crucial in this respect, though, is that teachers must be able to tap this knowledge specific to a given phenomenon and make it explicit for learners. Interestingly, natural L2 acquisition (e.g., Clahsen et al. 1983) has not yielded the same (positive) effects as instructed learning, where linguistic and cognitive (metalinguistic) knowledge are positively correlated (Berthele & Udry 2022).

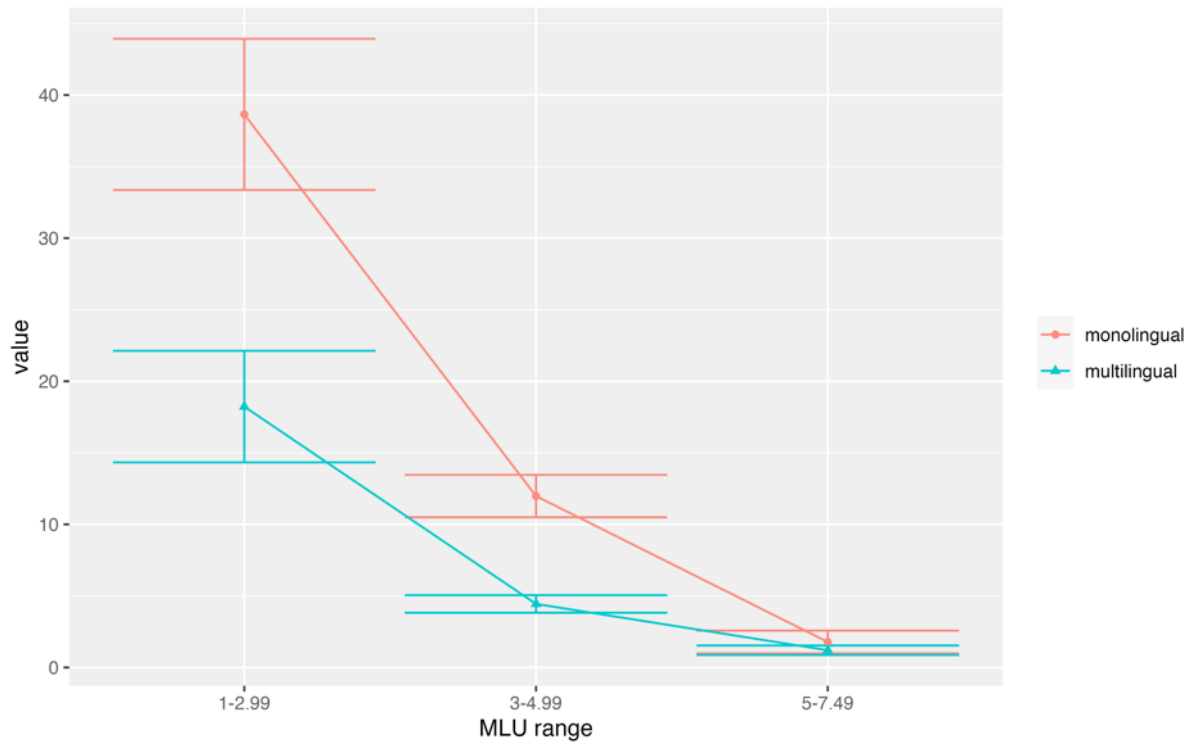


Figure 1. Subject omissions in French in monolingual and bilingual children (%) according to MLU development¹

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