The relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic cognitive control skills in bilingual children from low socio-economic backgrounds

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The present study examined whether linguistic cognitive control skills were related to non-linguistic cognitive control skills in monolingual children (Study 1) and in bilingual children from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (Study 2). Linguistic inhibitory control was measured using a grammaticality judgment (GJ) task in which children judged the grammaticality of sentences while ignoring their meaning. Non-linguistic inhibitory control was measured using a flanker task. Study 1, in which we tested monolingual English-speaking children, revealed that better inhibitory control skills, as indexed by performance on the flanker task, were associated with improved performance on the GJ task. Study 2, in which we tested bilingual English-Spanish speaking children from low SES backgrounds, revealed that better non-linguistic inhibitory control skills did not yield better performance on the GJ task. Together, these findings point to a role of domain-general attention mechanisms in language performance in typically developing monolingual children, but not in bilingual children from low SES. Present results suggest that the relationship between linguistic and domain-general cognitive-control abilities is instantiated differently in bilingual vs. monolingual children, and that language-EF interactions are sensitive to language status and SES.

Keywords: bilingualism, SES, syntactic processing, semantics, cognitive control

INTRODUCTION

A large body of research suggests that bilingualism may positively impact cognitive control mechanisms (e.g., Bialystok, 1999; Bialystok et al., 2004; Bialystok and Martin, 2004; Kroll et al., 2008; Kovács and Mehler, 2009) and executive functions (EF) in general. Executive functions refer to cognitive processes that aid in controlling and monitoring goal-directed behavior. They include the ability to inhibit irrelevant information and/or responses, the ability to shift between tasks or mental schemas, and the ability to update information in working memory (Miyake et al., 2000). Bilingual advantages have been observed in populations spanning a wide age range, from infancy to old age (e.g., Bialystok et al., 2004, 2005, 2006; Costa et al., 2008; Kovács and Mehler, 2009; Bialystok, 2010), and on a wide array of tasks requiring conflict resolution (e.g., Flanker: Carlson and Meltzoff, 2008; Costa et al., 2008; Simon: Bialystok, 2006; Martin-Rhee and Bialystok, 2008; Stroop: Bialystok et al., 2008). In such tasks, congruent, incongruent, and neutral stimuli are presented, where incongruent trials require inhibition of irrelevant information while attending to task-relevant information. Typically, when bilingual advantages are observed, they are observed on the incongruent trials that require increased cognitive control (e.g., Costa et al., 2008; Prior and MacWhinney, 2010), although recent studies have yielded overall bilingual advantages on cognitive control tasks, including the congruent trials (Costa et al., 2009).

The favored hypothesis for explaining these bilingual EF advantages is that bilinguals' two languages are continuously activated and, therefore, bilingual speakers are required to continuously monitor their linguistic environment in order to inhibit the irrelevant language. Thus, executive control exercised at the linguistic level is theorized to generalize to the non-linguistic level (Bialystok, 2001) resulting in enhanced cognitive control skills. However, the relationship between the linguistic and the non-linguistic cognitive control systems is poorly understood, and very few studies have examined the link between the two control systems directly (but see Martin et al., 2012 for an exception). Furthermore, conflicting evidence with regard to bilingual EF advantages has been accumulating with an ever-growing number of studies yielding a lack of bilingual–monolingual differences on non-linguistic cognitive control measures (e.g., Morton and Harper, 2007; Hilchey and Klein, 2011; Paap and Greenberg, 2013; Paap, 2014). One factor that appears to contribute significantly to the ability to observe bilingual advantages on EF tasks is socio-economic status (SES; Morton and Harper, 2007). The goals of the present study were twofold. First, we aimed to contribute to the literature on the roots of bilingual EF advantages by exploring the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic cognitive control skills in monolingual vs. bilingual children. Second, we aimed to contribute to the debate regarding the influences of SES to the development of linguistic and non-linguistic inhibitory control by exploring the relationship between them in two separate populations that represent the common demographic trends associated with monolingualism vs. bilingualism in the U.S.: a group of monolingual

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