

The Golden Thread of Words: How Bilingual Children Build Vocabulary

Hearing language is essential for every child, whether they grow up with one language or several. For multilingual children, though, the input they receive is more varied. It matters which language a child is spoken to in, whether the speech mixes words from both languages (code-switching), whether the speakers are multilingual themselves, and whether a language makes up most of what the child hears or only a small share. Each of these shapes the linguistic world a child learns words in, like different veins running through a seam of ore.

Children also differ in how quickly they process words. Speech moves at roughly two and a half words per second, so a child who spots a word fast and accurately has mental energy left over to notice the surrounding context. That builds richer, sturdier word knowledge. Efficient processors also need fewer encounters with a word's sound pattern to recognize it, which speeds up vocabulary growth.

Speed and input are linked, too. Research with bilingual children shows that processing speed depends on exposure and is specific to each language. Between ages two and three, a child's relative efficiency in their two languages tracks their relative vocabulary in those languages. A two-year-old who hears more Spanish than English, for instance, will retrieve Spanish words faster and learn more of them. A child's word-learning skill, then, isn't only a personal trait. It is closely tied to what they hear.

Children become bilingual in many ways, using their languages in different settings, at different times, and with different people. Their vocabulary is spread across both languages and overlaps only in part. Some words are known in just one language and are called singlets. A child might know math terms only in the language of school if they never do homework in their home language, or know the names of certain foods or religious customs only in the home language if those never come up elsewhere. This is perfectly natural, and adult bilinguals experience it too. Other words, called doublets or translation equivalents, are known in both languages because the child meets those ideas regularly in each.

Within the doublets sits a special group called cognates: words that sound alike, mean similar things, and sometimes share spelling, such as English "banknote" and Ukrainian "banknota." Bilingual children, like adults, show a cognate effect, meaning they name and recognize these words more accurately and quickly thanks to the overlap in sound and meaning. This boost has limits. Frequent, early-learned words benefit most, and individual backgrounds matter. Identifying cognates can even be easier in the weaker language, because the child can lean on strong knowledge in their dominant language to guess an unfamiliar word.

Because cognates ease learning, children whose languages share many of them, such as Catalan and Spanish, expand their total vocabulary faster than those whose languages are more distant, such as English and Mandarin. Still, shared form doesn't guarantee shared

meaning. “Coffee” and “caffè” are cognates, yet the drink carries different cultural associations in English-speaking and Italian settings. Being bilingual usually means being bicultural, and learning words in two languages depends on grasping what they mean socially and culturally as well as linguistically.