

# CHILDHOOD BILINGUALISM AND CATEGORY FORMATION: CASE OF GENDER

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The research output in the domain of childhood bilingualism is varied and voluminous. However, most of the data in this domain come from population who has ‘learnt’ their second language (henceforth L2) in formal environment. This entails serious implications in processing as well as the learning strategies of the learner, as the learning will be constrained in such cases. Some recent studies have pointed out the implications of social contexts of L2 on the processing strategies (Som *et al.*, 2018). Findings such as these point to the necessity of investigating the role context plays not only in case of language processing but also in acquisition. ‘What would be the strategy of the learner if they are free to learn the language on their own?’ is a question worth pondering on. One of the possibilities is that the impact of the L1 can be more freely observed in *social learning* of L2, as there is no ‘correction’ process involved in this case. Hence the existing data in this domain needs to be counterbalanced by studies on languages that are socially learnt, thus contributing to the basic research in this domain. Such studies are few and far between, more so in cases when both the languages in question are indigenous languages. Majority of research on SLA in India deals with English as a Second Language (Sahgal, 1991), studying atypical population, namely, children with stuttering, autism, dyslexia and so on (Geetha, 2015).

Secondly, latest findings in language acquisition of children suggest that language learning is part of general-purpose learning and does not happen in isolation (Hamrick *et al.*, 2018). In this light, it is interesting to investigate one of the primary mental functions, namely, category formation, with respect to language structure. Researchers have already pointed out the implications

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of language structure on bilingual cognition among adults, affecting habitual thought (Boroditsky *et al.*, 2003; Malt & Sloman, 2003; Cook *et al.*, 2006; Athanasopoulos, 2007; Kuo & Sera, 2009). In many cases, the bilinguals are found to *adjust* their categories keeping in mind the demands of both the first and second language. A good example of this was presented by Athanasopoulos (2009) in his study on colour categories by Greek-English bilinguals. Findings such this point to the necessity of carrying out similar research on children's acquisition of categories as well.

In this regard, the present study aims to look into the category of gender as learnt by children who speak a language without grammatical gender as their first language (Assamese) and a language with grammatical gender as their second language (Hindi). In order to investigate the natural way a child goes about learning the nuances of grammatical gender in their second language, the authors selected children from both Assamese and English medium schools, most of whom do not also have Hindi as a subject in their school curriculum. Thus, it ensured that the participants did not learn Hindi in formal, educational set up. Few of the participants in the study were yet to start school when the data was collected. This is part of an ongoing work and the initial results are reported here.

## 2. BACKGROUND: SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

One could say, following De Groot, *“On the face of it, learning a language is an easy thing to do. But the ability to speak a language actually is a matter of mastery of an extremely complex linguistic system which appeals to many sub-skills that all exploit a large database of knowledge”* (De Groot, 2011: 11). If a person speaks more than one language, it is a slightly more complex arrangement of that knowledge. Although a great deal of debate has gone into the definition of what constitutes bilingualism (Maftoon & Shakibafar, 2011: 80-83) and what can be called a second language of a learner, there is an agreement of sorts that Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the study of how a person learns a second language (L2) additionally to the first language (L1). Ellis (1984) defines it as the subconscious or conscious process by which a language other than the mother tongue is acquired in a natural or tutorial setting.