

Our lexicon includes terms that demonstrate our understanding of the fact that people's actions are governed by unseen motives. These are mental state terms and they include words such as, "know", "want", "imagine", "forget". They indicate our ability to perceive the psychological disposition of self and others and they shape our cognitive and social development. Their imperfect acquisition hinders communication, e.g. patients with autism spectrum disorders, who do not develop a full awareness of other people's emotions, experience problems in bonding with others or in grasping the formulaic communication.

We do not usually reflect on when we have learned the meaning of "want", or in what ways "know" is different from "guess". Researchers have found that even though we get our first taste of mental terms in early childhood, their full meaning is understood even later than that of other low-frequency verbs. Research on monolinguals has found that maternal storytelling rich in references to mental states significantly advances the child's competence in the area of mental state use and understanding. This is because stories are full of information on many perspectives of different characters, and this information helps children to establish the conceptual meaning of mental terms.

Our present knowledge indicates that the use of mental state terms relies on the acquisition of the conceptual information (the meaning) and the linguistic form. In typical development, the two are inherently connected: when mental state terms are used in discursive context, they help the child understand the concepts denoted by the words. However, it is still unclear whether and how the understanding of mental state concepts promotes later acquisition of words denoting these concepts. This question can be addressed precisely by studying bilingual children's understanding of mental state concepts and production of mental state terms. It often happens that bilingual children acquire their first language at home, from communication with their parents, and only later (usually as they start school) they acquire the language of the majority.

We will explore this question by testing Polish children living in the UK (children aged 4,5-6 years old). We will ask them and their Polish parents (mothers) to tell a quasi-spontaneous narrative based on a picture story. We will examine the relation between the amount of mental terms used by the parents and the children's use of mental state terms in their own narratives. We will also check whether bilingual children use a similar amount of mental state terms, and whether they understand them equally well in both of their languages.

We assume that when bilingual children first acquire mental state concepts in their home language, this conceptual knowledge serves then as scaffolding for the acquisition of the corresponding terms in their second language. If that is the case, we could expect mental terms in their second language to be acquired as fast as any other verbs with comparable lexical frequency. At the same time, they should be acquired relatively faster (i.e. in a shorter period of time) than mental terms in their first language. To test the hypothesis of this conceptual transfer, we will compare children's acquisition of mental state concepts in both languages, while controlling for their general lexical knowledge and parental input.