

Receptive competence at Warruwi Community (Australia): findings of a pilot study and plans for further experiments

At Warruwi Community, in northern Australia people speak many small Indigenous languages. They divide their extensive linguistic repertoires into languages that they can speak and languages they can just 'hear'. This receptive competence is an essential part of a regional language ecology. It is common to hear conversations at Warruwi in which each participant speaks a different language but understands the others speech. This practice is referred to here as receptive multilingualism and it relies on people having near-native levels of receptive competence in languages which they do not speak. This talk will present the findings of a pilot grammaticality judgement task and plans for three other kinds of experiments which aim to map out receptive competence in the Mawng language.

Research on receptive multilingualism looked initially on its use among speakers of related European languages, e.g. two Scandinavian languages (Gooskens 2019). However, there has now also been much research on receptive multilingualism in languages that differ typologically and genetically. Most research has not been in an experimental vein. However, Sherkina-Lieber conducted extensive experimental studies of heritage speakers of Labrador Inuttit in Canada, and found many were able to identify mistakes in the use of complex grammatical morphology (Sherkina-Lieber and Helms-Park 2015). Inspired by that work, the current study design includes four different tasks. The first task, a grammaticality judgement task has found like Sherkina-Lieber, that some people with minimal productive skills can still pick up subtle errors of agreement in complex verb morphology.

The plan for this multi-year project is to investigate receptive competence among people at Warruwi who identify as hearers of the Mawng language. Four experimental tasks will be used to do this comparison, which both hearers and speakers will be invited to participate in:

- a) Grammaticality Judgement Task: listen to sentences and identify mistakes
- b) Story Repetition Task: repeat story in own words, using a language spoken fluently
- c) Naming Task: name objects in pictures
- d) Narrative Task: produce sentences to describe transitive events in pictures

Receptive multilingualism can be depicted as a last resort for people with no common language (Rehbein et al. 2012). However, these models are at odds with the ordinary, fluent conversations heard at Warruwi everyday. A focus on the 'ideal speaker-hearer' has meant that many kinds of abilities have been overlooked in bilingual cognition research, including receptive competence (Polinsky 2018). Receptive multilingualism is an important part of the diverse multilingual language ecology of the coastal region of west Arnhem land, where Warruwi Community is situated (AUTHOR 2018) and is also significant in other areas of small-scale multilingualism (Pakendorf, Dobrushina and Khanina 2021). It is possible that widespread receptive multilingualism may drive the development of higher levels of linguistic diversity found in these regions. Understanding more about receptive competence will help us to model bilingual cognition in these contexts of small-scale multilingualism.

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