

# A CASE STUDY OF DIGLOSSIA IN SOUTH TYROL: GERMAN LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION AT PRE-SCHOOL AGE

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## *Abstract*

Bavarian is the native language of most South Tyroleans in Italy. Because Bavarian does not have a written form, German is used for reading, writing and formal communication. Few studies have empirically investigated the potential disadvantages posed to Bavarian-speaking children in their early language process. This study addresses language learning at the pre-primary school phase by comparing the German language comprehension of 54 Bavarian-speaking children (mean age=3;8 years) living in northern Italy and 44 native German peers (mean age=4;0 years) from Germany. Since all Bavarian speakers are educated in German, a language structurally distinct from the local form they grow up with, the objective of this research was to examine receptive German language comprehension using the standardized tool TROG-D (Fox, 2013). Preliminary results show that the diglossic context present in South Tyrol interferes with children's performance in German. Native German preschoolers performed significantly better than their Bavarian-speaking age-matched peers.

## *1. Introduction*

This paper presents an aspect of my doctoral thesis. The current study addresses the issue of diglossia, often disregarded in (first) language acquisition research. In a diglossic situation, the 'H(igh)' and 'L(ow)' (Ferguson, 1959) variety are often linguistically related, but there can also be significant linguistic distance between the two varieties in question, e.g. grammar, phonology, vocabulary and conventions of usage. This paper investigates whether children's ability to learn two varieties within a diglossic relationship is challenged in the same way as learning two languages by *Abstand* and *Ausbau* in Kloss's sense (1987).

Recent studies (e.g. Ibrahim & Aharon-Peretz, 2005; Ibrahim, 2009a) indicate that a diglossic situation has indeed a similar impact on children's linguistic development as in L2 development. The majority of previous research has been concerned within the diglossic context of the Arabic world and Switzerland. Studies about the nature of Arabic diglossia, for instance, have focused mainly on the field of education, since it is the realm where the impact of diglossia is most visible. Several authors claim that, for instance, the Arabic diglossic context hinders the acquisition of basic academic skills (Rosenhouse & Shehadi, 1986; Maamouri, 1998; Ayari, 1996). Even though there is an intensive, interactive and daily use of Spoken Arabic (L) and Modern Standard Arabic (H), studies have shown that the two languages are not processed identically, indicating that Spoken Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic have the status of two separate languages in the cognitive system of their speakers (Ayari, 1996; Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Ibrahim & Aharon-Peretz, 2005; Ibrahim, 2009b). In other words, this means that we are dealing with Spoken Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic bilinguals.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the differences between children growing up in a diglossic situation, namely South Tyrol, compared to their native German peers. South Tyrol is situated in the north of Italy on the border with Austria and Switzerland. It is officially considered a bilingual province and its inhabitants are formally labelled as ‘German-Italian bilinguals’. However, people’s native language is Bavarian and not German (Rowley, 2011). There are, therefore, three codes and not two (Italian, German and Bavarian) with both varying and overlapping roles, all interacting with each other. It is undisputable that German and Bavarian are linguistically related. Nonetheless, there are also differences in phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, phonetics, and grammar. Due to these differences Hinderling (1984) argued that Bavarian should receive the status of a separate language. He continues by claiming that the distance between German and Bavarian is bigger than between Danish and Norwegian. Previous research conducted among South Tyrolean children and pupils has also shown that Bavarian interferes when performing in German (Egger, 1979; Schwienbacher, 1997; Riehl, 2001).

Despite the fact that almost all speech directed to children prior to preschool entry is in Bavarian (Lanthaler, 2006), German is the main language taught and addressed to these children within educational institutions (see Art 19 of the *Statuto Speciale per il Trentino-Alto Adige*, and see *Treaty of Paris* 1946, Art 1). In other words, for these children socialisation takes place in Bavarian, whereas German is the language used in preschool and school, as well as the language for reading, writing, and formal communication. Therefore, any Bavarian-speaking child is de facto bilingual and becomes multilingual later on (Italian and English are compulsory subjects in school). In spite of the interest in the topic of language learning within the diglossic context, we know surprisingly little about the role that German plays in preschool children’s language development in South Tyrol.

The present study addresses two research questions:

1. How do Bavarian-speaking preschool children perform on a standardized German assessment test? How do they compare with their German peers?
2. Which types of exposure and input have an impact on children’s performance?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Fifty-four Bavarian-speaking preschoolers (30 males and 24 females) from South Tyrol and a control group of 44 age-matched monolingual German-speaking children (25 males and 19 females) participated in the study. The South Tyrolean children had a mean age of 46.19 months (range 36-59 months, SD=7.39), and had attended preschool between 2 weeks to 22 months (M=7.39 months, SD=6.34 months) at the time of testing. German children had a mean age of 48.23 months (range 36-59 months, SD=6.29), and they had been in preschool between 3 weeks and 25 months (M=12.48 months, SD= 6.97). Demographic characteristics of all preschoolers are displayed in Table 1.

	German-speaking children	Bavarian-speaking children
Total number of children	44	54
Male/female	25/19	30/24
Age at the time of testing in months (mean/SD)	48.23 (6.29)	46.19 (7.39)
Preschool attendance in months (mean/SD)	12.48 (6.97)	7.39 (6.34)

First born/only child	24 (54.5%)	29 (53.7%)
Child has at least 1 older sibling	20 (45.5%)	25 (46.3%)
Maternal education <sup>1</sup> (mean/SD)	1.41 (1.67)	1.56 (1.52)
Paternal education (mean/SD)	1.16 (2.29)	1.22 (1.50)

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study population.

Both groups lived in a rural area and attended preschools in South Tyrol and Germany respectively. One or both parents were educated beyond the secondary school level. 74% of the South Tyrolean mothers and 65% German mothers had a post-secondary diploma (College degree or University degree). Comparing maternal and paternal educational level among the two home language groups, an Independent T-Test revealed that there was no significant difference.

Additionally, South Tyrolean parents were asked to rate their language fluency and competence in German using a five-point rating scale (virtually no fluency=0, limited fluency=1, somewhat fluent=2, quite fluent=3, fluent=4). In the present study, mother's self-rated fluency was on average 3.78 (SD= .42), while fathers had a mean of 3.76 (SD= .43), suggesting that both parents' proficiency in German was quite high. Parents in South Tyrol were also asked to estimate the frequency of speaking German at home (never=0, occasionally=1, often=2, very often=3, always=4). The mean proportion of German spoken at home was .44 (SD= .538), indicating very low usage. Although adults seem to be very self-confident in using German, they mainly use Bavarian at home – a feature which is characteristic for diglossic situations.

Undoubtedly, self-assessing and self-rating questions provide estimation only rather than a direct measurement, which can reflect social expectations rather than the actual situation, as they can be overestimated or underestimated by the respondent (unconsciously or consciously) (Baker, 2011). Nonetheless, it has been claimed that self-assessment in bilingual communities are reliable because greater attention is given to language proficiency (e.g. Lieberman, 1970; Egger, 1985).

## 2.2. Materials and procedure

Two different methods were used to collect data: a parental questionnaire and the TROG-D test.

The questionnaire gathered information about subjects' general language behaviour at home, demographic information (age, gender), and German input at home (reading activities, watching television). Parents were also asked to state their highest degree awarded, and their occupation. South Tyrolean parents were further asked to rate their language proficiency in German as well as their language use at home. Due to the fact that Bavarian is a non-written language, the questionnaire was provided in German only.

Children's receptive vocabulary and grammar abilities were assessed by using the TROG-D (Fox, 2013). The test has been widely used by other researchers too, with monolingual (Sauerland & Yatsushiro, 2012; Von Lehmden et al., 2013) as well as with bilingual children and pupils (Rinker et al., 2011). The test involves presenting the child with four pictures while the experimenter reads the stimuli (either a word or sentence) in German. The task is to

<sup>1</sup> Maternal and paternal education quantified using a 2-point scale: 1=Secondary school or Professional qualification; 2=Post-secondary diploma or degree.

show which picture best matches that word/sentence. All 84 items are arranged in blocks of 4 sentences, containing the same grammatical construct (each with 3 distractors). If the child fails a single item within the block, he/she is considered to have failed the whole block. Once the child fails 5 successive blocks, the test ends.

Each child was tested individually in a quiet room in his/her preschool. In order to ensure that the child was tested in the variety he/she was most familiar with, the experimental settings in South Tyrol and Germany differed slightly from each other. In both cases the language of testing was German, but in South Tyrol the stimuli were read in German by a local person, while in Germany they were produced by a local native German speaker. The procedure took between 10 and 25 minutes per child.

There were two reasons for the fact that the Bavarian-speaking children were tested in German only. First of all, the TROG test does not exist in Bavarian. Secondly, officially and politically Germanic-speaking people in South Tyrol are labelled as ‘German speakers’. That these people acquire Bavarian at home and learn German later on and therefore should not be labelled and treated as German speakers is one of the reasons why this study is important, especially when we are talking about a diglossic speech community and how they should not be treated as monolinguals.

### 3. Results

The first research question asked how Bavarian-speaking children perform on a standardized test and how they compare with their German peers. Table 2 summarizes children’s mean raw score (in terms of number of blocks passed). The Independent-samples T-test showed that the German children performed significantly better than their South Tyrolean peers ( $t(80.721) = 4.771, p < .001$  two-tailed).

	Age group	N	Mean Raw Score (SD)
German-speaking children	3;0-4;11	44	8.11 (3.46)
Bavarian-speaking children	3;0-4;11	54	5.06 (2.72)

Table 2. Raw score and standard deviation (SD) for both home language groups.

The second research question asked which types of exposure and input have an impact on children’s performance. For answering the second research question, I shall present each type of input and exposure separately before discussing them in the following under-section.

#### *Maternal education*

To assess the relationship between maternal education and children’s test score, an Independent-samples T-test was performed. South Tyrolean children, whose mother had a College or University degree, had significantly higher test scores ( $M = 5.68$ ;  $SD = 2.74$ ) than those children whose mother had a secondary diploma only or a vocational school qualification ( $M = 3.08$ ;  $SD = 1.70$ ) ( $t(51) = -3.210, p < .01$ ). Similarly, a significant difference was also found between the mean scores of the two groups among the German home language group ( $t(41) = -2.14, p < .05$ ).

### *Birth order*

In South Tyrol, first-borns and only-children ( $n=29$ ) ( $M=4.31$ ;  $SD=2.37$ ) scored significantly lower than children with at least one older sibling ( $n=25$ ) ( $M=5.92$ ;  $SD=2.90$ ), ( $t(52)=-2.241$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In Germany, on the other hand, there was no significant difference between first-born/only-children ( $n=24$ ) ( $M=8.67$ ,  $SD=3.43$ ) and children with at least one older sibling ( $n=20$ ) ( $M=7.45$ ,  $SD=3.47$ ) ( $t(42)=1.164$ ,  $p>.05$ ).

### *Preschool attendance*

Preschool attendance was calculated by subtracting the time when the child started preschool from the child's age at time of testing. The range of preschool attendance was categorized as: 0-2 months, 3-9 months and 10-25 months. A One-way Between-Groups ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of length of preschool attendance and children's performance on the TROG-D. Results in South Tyrol and Germany were very similar, showing that length of preschool attendance had a significant effect on children's test scores,  $F(2, 51)=5.389$ ,  $p<.001$  and  $F(2, 41)=4.254$ ,  $p<.05$  respectively. Post-hoc-comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that in both home language groups the significant difference was between children with the longest preschool attendance (10-25 months) and those with the shortest preschool attendance (0-2 months), the former scoring significantly higher than the latter.

## *4. Discussion*

The objective of the present study was to gain more insight into children's development of German within a particular diglossic background.

The first research question in this study asked how Bavarian-speaking preschool children perform on a standardized assessment test and how they compare with their German peers. Preliminary results demonstrate (Table 2) that Bavarian-speaking children's performances on the test differ significantly from their monolingual age-matched peers. The findings gained in this study are consistent with previous work on diglossia (Ayari, 1996; Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Ibrahim & Aharon-Peretz, 2005; Ibrahim, 2009b), revealing that growing up in a diglossic situation is comparable to L2 learning where both languages differ by *Abstand* and *Ausbau*. This is also in accordance with previous research showing that L2 children are generally less accurate in standardised tests than monolingual children (e.g. Paradis, 2005; Paradis et al., 2008; Chondrogianni & Marinis, 2011).

The second research question examined which types of exposure and input have an impact on children's performance. In line with previous studies (Oller & Eilers, 2002; Hoff, 2006; Golberg et al., 2008; Paradis, 2009; Blom et al., 2010), this study confirms that maternal education in particular is a significant predictor of children's language development. Both home language groups in the study had more mothers with post-secondary diplomas than mothers with secondary diplomas or vocational school qualification. Results showed that there is a significant difference in both home language groups between the two groups, indicating that children whose mothers had a higher education performed more accurately and had higher TROG-D raw scores.

When comparing South Tyrol and Germany, one must consider the way that German language learning differs as well as the linguistic quality of input that children receive. In

both target areas children have various opportunities to come into contact with spoken German, which, moreover, might be quite different for each individual. Overall, it can be observed that in both areas input differs in terms of quantity and quality to which children are exposed. Cultural and social exposure to German will generally be less in South Tyrol than in Germany. While talking about spoken German, therefore, it is important to distinguish between German input from a native German speaker (e.g. tourist and in TV programs) and German input from South Tyroleans (e.g. parents who read to their children or radio programs produced in South Tyrol). German children will always be exposed to quantitatively more German input than their Bavarian-speaking peers. In addition, German children have more opportunities to interact with other German speakers, which undeniably foster language learning. South Tyrolean Bavarian-speaking children's access to German native speakers, on the other hand, is very limited. Several findings (Pearson et al., 1997; Gathercole, 2002a, 2002b; Paradis, 2009) observed that children's linguistic development is directly correlated to the amount of input they receive in that language. Numerous studies have shown, for instance, that reading has a positive influence on children's linguistic development (see Böhme-Dürr, 2001; Bertschi-Kaufmann, 2007). A review of the diglossic literature (Feitelson et al., 1993; Ayari, 1996; Abu-Rabia, 2000; for South Tyrol, see Bazzoli et al., 2007) demonstrates that regular reading familiarized preschool children with the 'H' variety, and early exposure to 'H' improved children's reading comprehension abilities, listening comprehension as well as other oral linguistic abilities. So, preschoolers' language development may benefit from their early exposure and familiarization with German. The answers provided in the questionnaire showed that all children are regularly exposed to German from very early on (e.g. television). So, even Bavarian-speaking children had already received some level of German input in their home environment, either from books or from television. Therefore, at least on the receptive level, children are already familiar with German before entering school. It can be assumed that this might be important for children's understanding of German and for creating a positive attitude to the language. Studies conducted in Switzerland showed that children who attended a preschool where German (H) was introduced were developing a more positive attitude towards the language, compared to preschoolers who attended a preschool where Schwyzertütsch (L) was spoken (Gyger, 2005, 2007; Landert, 2007). Positive attitudes and language awareness are necessary requirements for successful language learning. However, whether attending preschool or not has had an impact on South Tyrolean preschoolers performance remains unanswered as only preschoolers were tested in this study. Nonetheless, regardless of the language of community, it is interesting to note that in this study regular familiarization with the German language (either through books or television) does not seem to have significant effects on children's mean score.

In South Tyrol, German use in the home had no effect and did not predict children's performance on the TROG-D. Although most parents in South Tyrol were fluent in German, they reported a low use in the home, which can be the possible reason for the limited effect on the TROG-D results.

Regarding preschool attendance, results were similar in Germany and South Tyrol. The mean score for those children with the longest preschool attendance (10-25 months) was significantly higher from the mean score of the group with the lowest preschool attendance (0-2 months), (1) indicating that better performance on the TROG-D develops along with lengthier exposure and (2) implying that children benefit from their experience with German.

A novel finding of this study is the role that siblings play in South Tyrol. Research claiming that the pattern of relationship between siblings has an effect on child development is supported by the results found in Bavarian- and German-speaking children. In South Tyrol,

older siblings can be seen as a source of German input, or even a language model for their younger siblings (Baker, 2007), as they have already had more experience with the target language at school. Consequently, there is a greater amount of German input available for the child in question. Even though it has also been claimed that the input from siblings is structurally less complex and they use smaller vocabularies than adults (Hoff-Ginsberg & Krueger, 1991), these results demonstrate that older siblings do play a positive role in children's development in South Tyrol. Older siblings mean age was 7.97 years ( $SD=2.3$ ) and therefore they can be seen as an acceptable source of German input. In contrast, it has also been suggested in the literature that children with siblings receive less speech directly directed to them and hence less input from their parents, since adults necessarily have to divide their attention between their children (Jones & Adamson, 1987). This might explain why only-children in Germany achieved the highest mean score (although results were not significant). At the same time, however, these results raise the question why a similar pattern cannot be found in South Tyrol too. A possible explanation lies in the two language systems themselves: German and South Tyrolean Bavarian are linguistically distant which consequently has an impact on early children's development. Directed speech in Bavarian addressed to the South Tyrolean child does not seem to be sufficient. More importantly, older siblings can be seen a source of German input for their younger siblings as they learn German in school and bring the language into the family. Unlike Bavarian-speaking children, German preschoolers get a lot of input already from their family members as well as from their everyday social environment.

## 5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate the importance of considering similarities and differences between German and South Tyrolean Bavarian, especially within the educational context, and therefore gain a better understanding of the nature of children's linguistic development in a multilingual context. In particular, I hope to have shown that diglossia does have an impact and that it is worth investigating the extent of such an impact. South Tyrolean children's development of general grammatical abilities can be predicted by age, input availability (older siblings, length of preschool attendance) and higher level of mother's education, producing a complex structure which contributes to children's development. Learning success can be achieved even if it is not only provided by the institution itself, e.g. school, but also if there is intensive and structural varied linguistic input (e.g. siblings). The notion that hearing German at home, either through reading activities or watching TV, enhances German language development was not supported in this study. As characteristic for diglossic situations, the questionnaire showed that parents speak Bavarian most of the times to their children and therefore did not have a significant impact on their performance either.

For a more complete picture, future research should also include other methods, since all results presented in this paper arise from a receptive test. For instance, it would be interesting to see how Bavarian preschool children perform when using a productive test. A cross-sectional design investigating how older Bavarian-speaking children perform in such a task and observing their performance at different points in their development would also be interesting.

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