

Children's way with words sparks research

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For some scientists, research ideas can be found anywhere - even at home. Dr. Elena Nicoladis, a professor in the University of Alberta Department of Psychology, found her own children prompted fascinating language research questions.

"How can babies go from being such 'blobs' at birth to being so proficient in language that they can flatter, persuade, lie, make jokes and tell stories by the age of four? That's the question that gets me to work," Nicoladis said. "Language is the most noticeably human behaviour and we do exceptionally well at it."

Nicoladis conducts research in language acquisition, language switching in bilinguals, and gesture. She admits that her children, Nico and Zoe, have contributed great research ideas, some of which have ended up in scientific papers published in prestigious academic journals.

Nicoladis recalls that when her son Nico was two, he started saying 'my brush teeth' when he meant 'my tooth brush'. Nicoladis had been studying language acquisition for years, but had never heard or read anything about such an error before. The experts had no answers for her. Was her son weird? Was there a gap in the knowledge? Nicoladis' subsequent research showed that her son wasn't weird - he was just bilingual.

Indeed, Nico was learning French and English at the same time. The French structure for 'a tooth brush' is 'une brosse à dents' which, translated word for word, means 'a brush for teeth'. Nicoladis' findings

suggest that, in the process of acquiring two languages, bilingual children sometimes transfer structures from one language to another, but this is only a transitional stage. Unsurprisingly, Nico soon began asking for a new tooth brush.

Zoe, Nicoladis' s daughter, made her own contribution to her mother' s academic success. At age five, Zoe caught herself saying "the blanket white" and laughed heartedly. Nicoladis made a suggestion: "Maybe we should speak like this all the time: a fridge white, a cup blue, a dress red..." Zoe stopped to think, then said: "If we said that, we would not be speaking English." Nicoladis was intrigued by Zoe' s answer and, with the help of research funding from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, she began investigating how children learn word order in structures that contain adjectives and nouns, such as 'white blanket'.

In English, adjectives are used before nouns, but in French, adjectives follow nouns. Nicoladis found that children between the ages of two and four use these structures correctly, especially if they contain familiar words. And her research showed that children who speak only English are not willing to change word order and say 'blanket white', for example, not even as part of a game.

However, if the game contains non-existent adjectives, such as 'graffish', children are more willing to change the word order and say things like 'horse graffish' (for a horse with three legs). Nicoladis also found that children who speak both English and French, like Zoe, are more willing to say 'blanket white'. This is not because they speak English less well than monolingual children do, but because this order is the norm in French. Bilingual children know that the word order does not change meaning in these structures.

Nicoladis is a strong advocate of bilingualism. "There is nothing but advantages to bilingualism" she says. "The greatest advantage is that

bilinguals can speak with more people."

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