

Typical or atypical? Assessing language in bilingual children growing up in Sweden



Conference

Prof. Dr. Ute Bohnacker
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Thursday 23/04/2026, 17:15 - 18:45

Institute for Multilingualism
University of Fribourg
Rue de Morat 24, 1700 Fribourg
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Abstract

Around the world, speech-language pathologists, pediatricians and educators lament the fact that it is difficult to reliably identify typical development (TD) vs developmental language disorder (DLD) in bilinguals. Language tests developed for monolinguals usually don't work as intended for children growing up with two (or more) languages, and generally there is a lack of baseline data concerning bilingual children's linguistic development. In this talk, I will discuss the outcomes of a research project at Uppsala University (BiLI-TAS) that has mapped the development of oral language production and comprehension skills in 4-10-year-olds growing up in Sweden with Arabic or Turkish as their home language. We conducted cross-sectional studies (4-7 years) as well as longitudinal follow-ups at age 6 and 9-10, both for the child's home language and the majority language Swedish. I address the challenges, progress and setbacks in developing appropriate assessment methods, and present some of the main findings concerning vocabulary development, narrative skills (picture-based fictional storytelling) and phonological processing (non-word repetition).

Finally, I will discuss how background information from parents, particularly on language exposure, may help to interpret overlapping TD/DLD results.

Short bio

Ute Bohnacker is Professor of Linguistics at Uppsala University. Her research expertise is mainly in first and second language acquisition, child bilingualism, narrative, grammar and discourse, with a special interest in the Germanic languages. She has also published on family language policy and heritage language transmission (Turkish, Arabic). Over the past ten years, her work has expanded towards language assessment and impaired populations and examines typical and atypical multilingual child language development in a Swedish context. Together with Natalia Gagarina (Leibniz-ZAS Berlin), she has spearheaded the development of the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN), which is now being used to elicit and assess oral narratives from children in many languages around the world.