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Comprehension of Code-switching by Bilingual Infants

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Abstract: Bilingual children are regularly exposed to code-switching, a linguistic phenomenon consisting of mixing two languages within the same context (Byers-Heinlein, 2013a). Studies have demonstrated that adults are slower to process code-switched language (Grainger & O’regan, 1992), and preliminary studies testing intra-sentential switches (“Where is the chien?”) found similar results with toddlers (Byers-Heinlein, 2013b). Here, we investigated 20-month-olds’ processing of code-switching across a sentence boundary (inter-sentential switching). In a preferential looking paradigm, 10 English-French bilinguals viewed a target and a distractor image on an eyetracking screen. Contrary to the predictions, children showed similar accuracy in looking at the labeled referent in code-switched contexts (e.g. “That one looks fun! Le chien!”) as in single-language contexts (e.g. “That one looks fun! The dog!”). The outcome suggests that code-switching does not always accrue a processing cost, and that the impact of a code-switch on processing depends on the location of the switch.