What does the Sentence Structure component of the CELF-IV index, in monolinguals and bilinguals?

Cécile DE CAT* and Tara MELIA

University of Leeds, UK

*Corresponding author: University of Leeds - Linguistics & Phonetics School of Languages, Cultures and Societies Leeds LS2 9JT UK, E-mail: c.decat@leeds.ac.uk

(Received 21 January 2019; revised 3 December 2020; accepted 8 December 2020; first published online 7 July 2021)

Abstract

The Sentence Structure sub-test (SST) of the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF) aims to “measure the acquisition of grammatical (structural) rules at the sentence level”. Although originally designed for clinical practice with monolingual children, components of the CELF, such as the SST, are often used to inform psycholinguistic research. Raw scores are also commonly used to estimate the English proficiency of bilingual children. This study queries the reliability of the SST as an index of children’s ability to deal with structural complexity in sentence comprehension, and demonstrates that cognitive complexity induces a considerable confound in the task, affecting 5- to 7-year-old monolinguals (n = 87) and bilinguals (n = 87) alike.

Introduction

The Sentence Structure sub-test of the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF-4-UK – Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 2006) aims to “measure the acquisition of grammatical (structural) rules at the sentence level” (CELF manual p.88). CELF scaled scores are widely used to assess the language development of native speakers of English. CELF raw scores have also been used to estimate the English proficiency of bilingual children (see e.g., Barac & Bialystok, 2012; Iluz-Cohen & Armon-Lotem, 2013; Paradis, Crago, Genesee, & Rice, 2003). Although originally designed for clinical practice, components of the CELF are often used to inform psycholinguistic research. The SST in particular is commonly used as a stand-alone measure of receptive syntax, both in monolinguals (e.g., Foorman, Herrera, Petscher, Mitchell, & Truckenmiller, 2015; Justice, Petscher, Schatschneider, & Mashburn, 2011; Fricke, Bowyer-Crane, Haley, Hulme, & Snowling, 2013; Tager-Flusberg & Sullivan, 1994) and in bilinguals (e.g., Bowyer-Crane, Fricke, Schaefer, Lervåg, & Hulme, 2017; Chondrogianni & John, 2018).
While it would be unrealistic to expect that any test might be able to yield a "pure measure" of the aspect of language it is designed to assess, test reliability requires that performance scores be robustly associated with properties of the language aspect targeted, and that the influence of other factors (whether linguistic or cognitive) does not interfere significantly. The impact of structural complexity on sentence comprehension is particularly challenging to assess, as it requires the use of complex visual prompts (Frizelle, Thompson, Duta, & Bishop, 2019). This study explores the extent to which children's performance in the SST is predicted by structural complexity. As a first step, this requires clarifying how structural complexity is operationalised.

**Structural complexity**

The SST is presented in the manual as a subtest of language comprehension “which focuses specifically on syntax at the spoken sentence level” (manual, p.89). This subtest is designed to present the child with structures of varying degrees of complexity: “Individuals with language disorders… have problems with processing and interpreting spoken sentences when the language increases in structural complexity (sentence transformations) and in syntactic compression (idea density). Studies of these individuals suggest that they may have problems integrating the surface sentence structure and deep sentence structure…. This seems especially evident for spoken sentences that contain subordinate or relative clauses.” (CELF manual pp.88–89). No complexity ranking is provided in the manual, so expectations regarding the relative difficulty of items can only be reconstructed based on the description above. What constitutes sentence structure complexity will of course vary to an extent depending on the theoretical framework. In this study, we try to embrace different theoretical perspectives by operationalizing structural complexity in different ways, based on (i) a rigorous interpretation of the brief description available in the manual, (ii) an index of clausal structure complexity, (iii) predictions from the language acquisition literature (focusing on the syntactic structures featured in the SST), (iv) structural complexity rankings provided by independent language acquisition experts. Next, we turn to the cognitive demands of the task, as a potential confounding factor.

**Cognitive demands**

In terms of task demands, each trial of the CELF SST presents the child with four pictures and requires choosing the one that matches the prompt sentence. To inform their choice, children need to evaluate differences between the four pictures in relation with the prompt sentence, and then to identify the one that best fits the prompt. Inferencing and reasoning are therefore key components of the task.

Inferencing is required in this task because the child needs to understand more than the individual words and sentences (Cain, Oakhill, Barnes, & Bryant, 2001; Oakhill & Cain, 2018). S/he needs to assemble a mental model of the situation described by each sentence, which requires going beyond the literal meaning. This might require drawing local cohesion inferences (which establish the required connections between parts of the sentence and are triggered by textual elements) and global coherence inferences (which are required to achieve an understanding of the sentence as a whole, within its context). In this task, the mental model required to interpret each sentence will be rather minimal, as there is no contextual build-up from one test item to the next. Most of the inferences required are therefore more likely to relate to the global coherence that
needs to be established between the sentence and its best-matching picture. Such inferences are based on knowledge of the world (e.g., What does feeding a cat involve? From what point does the actual feeding begin?) and visual literacy (e.g., Can a verb in future tense be depicted by an image showing an action that is already under way?).\(^1\) Local linking inferences are, however, also required in some cases: to establish an anaphoric link between a pronoun and its antecedent in the same sentence (as in (1-a)) or a particular character in the pictures (he vs. she in (1-b)).

\[(1)\] a. The girl is wearing her new raincoat although she doesn’t need it.

b. She is climbing and he is swinging.

Once the inferences have been drawn, reasoning is required to assess whether the information gathered from each picture (whether simply descriptive, or inference-based) matches the information gathered from the sentence.

It is reasonable to expect the cognitive demands of the SST to have some impact on children’s performance. Indeed, all language comprehension tests are cognitively demanding to some extent. However, if the main purpose of a test is to assess language abilities, cognitive demands should be sufficiently controlled so as not to confound the language ability that the test aims to measure.

Finally, we need to consider the extent to which the SST can provide a reliable measure of bilingual children’s ability to deal with structural complexity in sentence comprehension.

**Language exposure and language proficiency in bilinguals**

In bilinguals, language proficiency is affected by a broader range of factors than in monolinguals, including language exposure (in terms of quantity and age of onset) and cross-linguistic influence (Armon-Lotem, de Jong, & Meir, 2015). Comparatively lower amounts of language exposure in bilinguals imply that they cannot be expected to perform according to monolingual age-based norms until a sufficient threshold of exposure has been reached (Cattani et al., 2014). Convergence with monolingual norms has been shown to vary by linguistic sub-domain and by task difficulty (Paradis & Jia, 2017; Paradis, 2019; Schulz & Grimm, 2019). In heritage speakers, it is not uncommon to observe a discrepancy between receptive and productive skills, even within the same domain (Montrul, 2016), but such a discrepancy is not expected to be as pronounced in the school language, as children interact in that language for many hours a day and benefit from literacy training.

**The present study**

The reliability of the SST depends on its ability to detect the impact of structural complexity on children’s performance, IN SPITE OF the cognitive demands of the task. In other words, the impact of cognitive demands should not obscure the effect of structural complexity.

In bilingual children schooled in English, language exposure is expected to predict performance in English proficiency tests until a sufficient threshold of exposure has

\(^1\)We understand visual literacy as the ability to translate pictorial stimuli into mental imagery. See Brumberger (2019) for a recent overview of visual literacy research.
been reached. While some variability is expected across tests and language domains, aspects of proficiency that are still developing can be expected to be sensitive to the amount of language exposure experienced.

In light of the above, our hypotheses are as follows:

(2) a. Structural complexity should predict performance on the CELF-SST;
   b. Cognitive factors are likely to have an impact on performance in the SST, but this should not obscure the impact of structural complexity.
   c. If language exposure is predictive of performance in alternative tests probing structural complexity, it should also correlate with performance in the SST.

This study is based on the secondary analysis of existing data, in order to assess whether these hypotheses are verified. In the next section, we present the population sample and the linguistic and cognitive measures of the original study which will be exploited in the current study. Then we explain how we derived the alternative indices of structural complexity and cognitive complexity of SST items. This yields four alternative rankings of item difficulty in terms of structural complexity, and two alternative rankings in terms of cognitive complexity. In the results section, we start by exploring visually whether the complexity indices correlate with children’s response accuracy in the SST. For those that do, we then model the statistical significance of the effect, in light of other predictors (aiming to capture profile effects, i.e., individual differences between participants). Next, focusing on bilingual children, we compare predictors of performance across proficiency tests. In the last section, we discuss the interpretation of our results and their implications for psycholinguistic research.

**Methods**

The data to be discussed below was collected as part of an investigation of the relationship between executive function skills (cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control and working memory) and language experience in young bilingual children with unbalanced exposure to two languages, investigating these children’s ability to make referential choices appropriate to their listener’s information needs (see Serratrice & De Cat, 2020). In this section, we describe the population sample and the linguistic and cognitive measures from the original study that are relevant for our present purpose.

**Participants**

Our population sample includes 174 children (including 87 monolinguals) between the ages of 5 and 7 from schools in the North of England. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Leeds (Ref. PVAR 12-007), and parental consent was obtained prior to data collection.

All the children were in English monolingual education. The bilingual children also experienced various degrees of exposure to a different language at home (henceforth the HOME LANGUAGE). There was a total of 28 Home Languages in our sample: bilingual and monolingual children were recruited from the same schools for maximum

---

2 The children’s home languages included: Arabic (9%), Bengali, Cantonese, Catalan, Dutch, Farsi, French (8%), Greek, Hindi, Italian, Kurdish, Mandarin, Marathi, Mirpuri, Nepalese, Pashto, Polish,
comparability. None of the children were excluded from the study. All were reported by the school to be developing typically and not to have any known hearing deficit.

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the two groups in gender and age. For ease of reference, we will use the term “bilinguals” to refer to children with any amount of exposure to a Home Language. The extent to which these children are bilingual was estimated more precisely on the basis of the amount of language exposure experienced.\(^3\)

**Language experience**

The amount of English exposure for each child was estimated on the basis of information gathered via parental questionnaires, using a simplified version of the BiLEC (Unsworth, 2013). Current exposure to English was calculated as the cumulative proportion of total English exposure experienced at school and at home,\(^4\) divided by the total number of hours of interaction. Cumulative exposure to English was estimated from the number of months of bilingual exposure multiplied by the proportion of current exposure to (or use of) English. The cumulative measures thus correspond to the total number of months equivalent to full-time exposure to English. Cumulative exposure to English was found to be the best predictor of English proficiency in this population sample (see De Cat, 2020) and will therefore be used in as predictor in the current study.

Figure 1 shows that the bilingual children in our sample varied greatly in terms of their cumulative exposure to English. Some children’s English exposure was close to monolingual levels (having experienced relatively little exposure to another language at home over their lifetime); some children had just started being exposed to English at the beginning of the current school year. The correlation between age and cumulative exposure to English was nonetheless significant (Pearson’s product-moment correlation: \(t = 2.38, p = 0.02\)).

**Socio-economic profiles**

The schools targeted were in areas of varying degrees of affluence, so as to recruit children from as broad as possible a socio-economic spectrum. The socio-economic

---

**Table 1. Participant distribution in gender and age (in months)**

|                  | Gender | Min. | Max | Mean | St.Dev. |
|------------------|--------|------|-----|------|---------|
| **Bilinguals**   |        |      |     |      |         |
| \((n = 87)\)     | F (n = 44) | 5;1  | 6;9 | 5;10 | 0;5     |
|                  | M (n = 43) | 5;1  | 7;0 | 5;10 | 0;6     |
| **Monolinguals** |        |      |     |      |         |
| \((n = 87)\)     | F (n = 52) | 5;0  | 7;0 | 6;0  | 0;7     |
|                  | M (n = 35) | 5;0  | 7;0 | 6;0  | 0;7     |

Portuguese, Punjabi (21%), Shona, Somali, Spanish (6%), Swedish, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tigrinya, and Urdu (17%). Percentages are given for those languages representing more than 5% of the sample.

\(^3\)See De Cat (2020) for an in-depth discussion of language exposure thresholds in relation to the definition of bilingualism.

\(^4\)Home exposure to English was broken down by interlocutor: The total number of hours of interaction with each interlocutor was multiplied by the proportion of the time English was used with that interlocutor.
status of the children’s families was estimated on the basis of information gathered via a parental questionnaire. Parental occupation data were scored using the reduced method of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (simplified NS-SEC, which is based on the Goldthorpe Scheme of sociological classification – Goldthorpe, 1980). The distribution of scores by group is shown in Figure 2. In spite of our attempt to recruit balanced samples, the bilinguals were at a slight but significant disadvantage (as a group) compared with the monolinguals (Welch Two Sample t-test: t = 2.45, p = 0.02).

Proficiency measures

Several measures of English language proficiency were collected to assess different aspects of language competence.

The LITMUS sentence repetition task (Marinis, Chiat, Armon-Lotem, Gibbons, & Gipps, 2010; Marinis & Armon-Lotem, 2015) was used as a measure of language processing at all levels of representation (phonological, morpho-syntactic and semantic). Although a production measure, it taps into comprehension to the extent that it is necessary for correct repetition. The test was designed for bilingual populations. It comprises 30 sentences with three levels of structural difficulty (see Appendix for a full list of items, by difficulty level). As our focus here is on structural complexity, accuracy was scored as the correct repetition of the target structure, as per the LITMUS manual.⁵ Utterances containing unintelligible material were excluded (total: 208, i.e., 4% of the data).

⁵See De Cat (2020) for a comparison of the alternative scoring methods in this group of children.
We included four lexical-semantic tests of the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (DELV – Seymour, Roeper, & de Villiers, 2005)\(^6\). Three of them (the verb and preposition contrasts, real verb mapping, and novel verb mapping tasks) tap into lexical semantics. In addition, the DELV articles task taps into discourse semantics.

The Sentence Structure subtest of the CELF was chosen to provide a measure of receptive syntax.

**Baseline cognitive measures**

From the set of cognitive measures collected for the original study, two are relevant here to inform our appraisal of the cognitive demands of the language proficiency tasks.

Measures of short-term and working memory were obtained from the Digit Span tasks (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III – Wechsler, 1991). The Forward Digit Span measure was used as a proxy for children’s short term memory capacity, a key component in Baddeley’s (2000) Multicomponent Working Memory Model, which has been argued to represent a constraint in language processing (Boyle, Lindell, & Kidd, 2013). The Backward Digit Span measure was used as a proxy for children’s working memory capacity, which has been shown to correlate with spoken sentence comprehension (Montgomery, Magimairaj, & O’Malley, 2008; Magimairaj & Montgomery, 2012). The raw results on the memory tests are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

To assess children’s cognitive flexibility, we administered the Dimensional Change Card Sort task, following the protocol described in Zelazo (2006). Performance was

---

\(^6\)The DELV is a dialect-neutral assessment for 4- to 9-year-olds, aiming to limit the effects of language exposure differences in bi-cultural populations.
scored based on a pass-fail criterion on each trial block. The distribution of scores is shown in Table 4.

**Operationalization of structural complexity in the CELF SST**

Semel et al. (2006: 88–89) states that the SST includes items that vary in “structural complexity (sentence transformations) and in syntactic compression (idea density). Studies of these individuals suggest that they may have problems integrating the surface sentence structure and deep sentence structure. This seems especially evident for spoken sentences that contain subordinate or relative clauses.” No grading of items is provided, however. In the following four subsections, we explore four alternative operationalizations of structural complexity that are compatible with the definition provided in the CELF manual (quoted above, in the introduction). Subsequently, the resulting structural complexity rankings of items will be presented in a comparative table (Table 8).

**Movement and Embedding**

In current linguistic terminology, one could interpret the CELF definition of complexity provided in the manual as follows: (i) structures that involve syntactic movement should

| Table 2. Forward Digit Recall (number of digits correctly recalled) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
|                  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  |
| Monolinguals     | 9  | 34 | 35 | 8  | 1  |
|                  | 10%| 39%| 40%| 9% | 1% |
| Bilinguals       | 13 | 34 | 37 | 2  | 1  |
|                  | 15%| 39%| 43%| 9% | 1% |

| Table 3. Backward Digit Recall (number of digits correctly reversed) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
|                  | 0  | 2  | 3  | 4  |
| Monolinguals     | 0  | 32 | 52 | 3  |
|                  | 0% | 37%| 60%| 3% |
| Bilinguals       | 3  | 34 | 46 | 4  |
|                  | 3% | 39%| 53%| 5% |

| Table 4. Distribution of overall DCCS scores (based on block pass-fail) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| DCCS score | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Monolinguals | 0 | 2 | 26 | 59 |
|              | 0% | 1% | 15% | 34% |
| Bilinguals | 1 | 12 | 39 | 35 |
|            | 1% | 07% | 22% | 20% |
be more complex (i.e., passives, *wh*-questions, relative clauses), (ii) sentences with a subordinate clause should be more complex than monoclausal sentences, and (iii) relative clauses should be particularly complex as they are embedded clauses involving syntactic movement. How to interpret “syntactic compression (idea density)” (and which test items it maps onto) is unclear.

Based on this operationalization of structural complexity, the easiest items should be those that do not feature movement nor embedded clauses. Items featuring embedded clauses should be comparatively more difficult. Items featuring movement (such as passives or *wh*-questions) should also be more difficult than the ‘baseline’ items, and possibly more difficult than biclausal sentences without NP movement. The hardest items should presumably be those that combine movement and an embedded clause. This operationalization of structural complexity is in line with the principles that define difficulty level in the LIT-MUS sentence repetition (SRep) test, in which Movement and Embedding are manipulated factorially. An important difference between the two tests is that the *wh*-structures in the SST include only one (adjunct) *wh*-question and the three relative clauses all involve subject dependencies, whereas in the SRep the *wh*-structures are all object dependencies (6 object questions and 5 object relative clauses). The SRep test also manipulates the presence of a *by*-phrase in passives (absent from Level 1 (N = 3), present at Level 2 (N = 3)); in the SST, the two passive structures both include a *by*-phrase.

According to this operationalization, four levels of structural complexity could be defined, as follows:

(3) a. Level 1: sentences featuring no syntactic movement and no embedded clause (but possibly including coordinated clauses)
   b. Level 2: biclausal sentences featuring an embedded clause (complement clause, direct quotation, or adverbial clause)
   c. Level 3: monoclausal sentences featuring syntactic movement (i.e., a passive or a *wh*-question)
   d. Level 4: biclausal sentences featuring syntactic movement and an embedded clause

*Clause types*

Another notable difference between the SRep and the SST is that only the latter features a broad range of clause types, as shown in Table 5. To capture this variety, we propose to use clause type as an alternative operationalization of structural complexity, as per the order of rows in that table: a sentence with conjoined clauses is structurally more complex than a monoclausal sentence; direct quotation could be argued not to involve as much syntactic structure as embedded clause; adverbial clauses could be argued to be structurally more complex than complement clauses as their syntactic position can vary; relative clauses would be considered the most complex as they involve a syntactic dependency as well as embedding.

*Age of acquisition*

On the assumption that simpler structures are acquired first, we surmise that age of acquisition by typically-developing monolinguals could be a reliable indicator of processing difficulty, and that this could have an impact on sentence comprehension.
The predicted level of difficulty based on this criterion was informed by a review of the literature on the acquisition of the structures featured in the SST. As our starting point, we used the D-Level Scale of structural complexity from Covington, He, Brown, Naci, and Brown (2006) (which is itself a revision of the scale proposed by Rosenberg & Abbeduto, 1987). The original scale was based on the order of acquisition in typically developing children; the revision was based on psycholinguistic evidence. The revised D-Level Scale comprises 7 levels (as shown in (4)), with the highest complexity level resulting from the combination of structures from lower levels.

(4) The revised D-Level Scale (Covington et al., 2006)

- **Level 0**: Simple sentence
- **Level 1**: Non-finite clause as object without overt subject
- **Level 2**: Coordinated structure
- **Level 3**: Finite clause as object with overt subject
- **Level 4**: Non-finite clause as object with overt subject
- **Level 5**: Finite or non-finite adjunct clause
- **Level 6**: Complex subject
- **Level 7**: More than one structure from Levels 1–6

Not all the structures in (4) are instantiated in the SST, and not all the relevant features of the SST are captured by the revised D-Level Scale. To evaluate the level of difficulty of the structural features absent from the revised D-Level Scale, we reviewed the relevant acquisition literature. To obtain a sufficient number of items per level, we also condensed the scale into 4 levels.

(5) Our proposed scale of structural complexity, based on Age of Acquisition:

- **Level 1**: Monoclausal, affirmative sentences in active voice, which might contain a PP, an auxiliary or modal verb, a direct object, or NP coordination.
- **Level 2**: Monoclausal negative, active sentences or biclausal sentences featuring co-ordinated clauses or an infinitival complement.
- **Level 3**: Monoclausal passive sentences, complex sentences containing an affirmative direct quotation or an affirmative adverbial clause.
- **Level 4**: Complex sentences containing a relative clause, a negative adverbial clause, or a direct quotation featuring either a negation or a wh-question.
Level 1 represents the baseline, featuring the least complex structures (all in monoclausal sentences). Level 2 includes sentential negation, as it appears relatively early in spontaneous speech production but takes a long time to mature (Klima & Bellugi, 1966; Thornton & Tesan, 2013). Coordinated clauses and infinitival complement clauses appear well before the age of 3 (Van Valin Jr, 2001) and do not present comprehension difficulties in 4 year-olds (Friedmann & Costa, 2010). It is not clear whether coordinated structures appear before infinitival complements (Vasilyeva, Waterfall, & Huttenlocher, 2008) so we allowed them to coexist in the same level. Level 3 includes direct quotations, as these have been shown to pose comprehension difficulties for children up to the age of 4 (Hollebrandse, 2007). It also includes adverbial clauses, as these appear later than complement and coordinated clauses (Vasilyeva et al., 2008) and remain difficult to interpret for 4- to 5-year-olds (de Ruiter, Theakston, Brandt, & Lieven, 2017). Children’s comprehension of passive sentences is in place in typically-developing 5- to 6-year-olds (van der Lely, 1996). Level 4 includes relative clauses, as these appear later than adverbial clauses in spontaneous speech (Vasilyeva et al., 2008). It also includes negative complex sentences, as these combine two complexity features from lower levels.

**Expert ratings**

Finally, we conducted a survey of language acquisition specialists from different theoretical persuasions, to inform the creation of a 4-level structural complexity ranking of SST items. Our aim was to elicit relative complexity rankings for the following structures:

(6) a. coordinated clauses  
  b. infinitival clauses  
  c. sentential negation  
  d. direct quotations  
  e. passives  
  f. relative clauses  
  g. adverbial clauses

We created seven sets of sentences from the SST, with each set including two of the structures of interest. Each set also included a simple baseline (featuring none of the structures in (6)) and an item featuring a relative clause, as these were presumed to be the most complex. In that way, each set comprised two structures of interest and two anchoring points (targeting low and high structural complexity respectively). Apart from (6-a) and (6-g), each structure was included in more than one set, so it could be compared with several other structures. The composition of the seven sets is summarized in Table 6. Twenty-one out of the 26 SST items were included in the survey. The 5 excluded items were all of the simplest type (as in the Baseline).

Each set included 6 items: two anchoring points (a simple sentence and a relative clause), and two sentences per structure of interest. A brief description of the structural properties of the baseline items is given in (7). For the high-level anchoring points we used the same two sentences (alternating from one set to the next).

---

7 Set 3 included 3 relative clauses, as one was used as anchoring point.
All baseline items were monoclausal, affirmative and active sentences featuring one of the following:

a. A subject NP and a PP modifying the V (sets 2, 3, 5, 6)
b. A subject NP and an object NP (set 4)
c. A subject NP, a direct object NP and an indirect PP complement (set 7)

Five SST items were rated more than once (i.e., they were repeated across sets), as there were not enough representatives of each type of structure to allow for different items in each set.

Participants were asked to rate each sentence on a 4-point scale reflecting (low to high) structural complexity. The sentences were presented on their own, without the set of pictures associated with them in the SST. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling (through the researchers’ contacts) and advertised on the CHILDES Google Group. Thirty-one participants completed the survey.

The results are displayed by set in Figure 3. The only set in which the baseline item is rated higher than 2 is Set 1 (which compared coordinated clauses with infinitival clauses): in that case, the baseline item was itself a coordinated structure (2 NPs).

The average ratings for each structure were highly consistent across items and across sets: the difference between item scores was never greater than .33 of a point (on the 4-point scale), with an average difference of .2. The average ratings by structure are shown in Table 7.

Four levels of structural complexity were derived from the distribution of the average scores of the structures of interest (8).

Table 6. Structures of interest featuring in the comparison sets in the expert survey on structural complexity

| Structure              | Set 1 | Set 2 | Set 3 | Set 4 | Set 5 | Set 6 | Set 7 |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| coordinated clauses    | x     |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| infinitival clauses    |       | x     | x     |       |       |       |       |
| sentential negation    |       | x     |       | x     |       |       | x     |
| direct quotations      | x     |       | x     |       | x     |       |       |
| passives               |       |       |       |       | x     | x     |       |
| relative clauses       |       |       |       |       |       | x     |       |
| adverbial clauses      |       |       |       |       |       |       | x     |

(7) All baseline items were monoclausal, affirmative and active sentences featuring one of the following:

a. A subject NP and a PP modifying the V (sets 2, 3, 5, 6)
b. A subject NP and an object NP (set 4)
c. A subject NP, a direct object NP and an indirect PP complement (set 7)

Table 8 shows the structural complexity levels for each SST item, according to the four alternative operationalizations. In spite of a certain level of incongruence between the four predictors of structural complexity (as seen in Table 8), the expectation is that there will be a negative correlation between children’s accuracy scores and the SST items’ structural complexity.
Operationalisation of the cognitive demands of the CELF SST

To allow the investigation of the impact of global inferences on children’s performance in the SST, we propose three hypothetical sources of inference difficulties (9), based on our analysis of the test items in the context of their respective set of pictures. For each test item, this analysis consisted in unveiling the global inference that best captured the relationship between the sentence and a key semantic aspect manipulated across the set.

Figure 3. Results of the Structural Complexity rating survey, showing SST items’ mean ratings by structure, in each comparison set.

Table 7. Average rating for structural complexity, by structure

| Structure                | Average.rating |
|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Baseline                 | 1.46            |
| Sentential.negation      | 1.58            |
| Infinitival.clauses      | 1.60            |
| Direct quotation         | 1.92            |
| Coordinated.clauses     | 2.17            |
| Passives                 | 2.91            |
| Adverbial.clauses        | 3.13            |
| Relative clauses         | 3.32            |

Operationalisation of the cognitive demands of the CELF SST

To allow the investigation of the impact of global inferences on children’s performance in the SST, we propose three hypothetical sources of inference difficulties (9), based on our analysis of the test items in the context of their respective set of pictures. For each test item, this analysis consisted in unveiling the global inference that best captured the relationship between the sentence and a key semantic aspect manipulated across the set.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000920000823 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Table 8. Structural complexity rankings, according to four different operationalizations: Movement + embedding, Clausal structure, Age of acquisition, Expert ratings. The items are listed in the order in which they are presented in the test.

| Sentence                                                                 | Movement and embedding | Clausal structure | Age of acquisition | Expert rating |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| The girl has a big spotted black and white dog.                          | 1                      | 1                 | 1                  | 1             |
| They like to make biscuits.                                              | 2                      | 4                 | 2                  | 1             |
| The spotted puppy is in the box.                                         | 1                      | 1                 | 1                  | 1             |
| The girl who is standing in front of the line is wearing a rucksack.     | 4                      | 6                 | 4                  | 4             |
| The boy who is sitting under the big tree is eating a banana.            | 4                      | 6                 | 4                  | 4             |
| The girl took some flowers to her mother.                                | 1                      | 1                 | 1                  | 1             |
| She is climbing and he is swinging.                                      | 1                      | 2                 | 1                  | 2             |
| The girl is not ready for school.                                        | 1                      | 1                 | 2                  | 1             |
| Dad sat behind the children.                                             | 1                      | 1                 | 1                  | 1             |
| The first two children are in line but the third child is still playing. | 1                      | 2                 | 1                  | 2             |
| The girl is not painting.                                                | 1                      | 1                 | 2                  | 1             |
| The woman who is holding the baby dropped her handbag.                   | 4                      | 6                 | 4                  | 4             |
| The woman asked: ‘How much does that chair cost?’                       | 3                      | 3                 | 4                  | 2             |
| Mum showed the dog the cat.                                              | 1                      | 1                 | 1                  | 1             |
| The girl is being pushed by the boy.                                     | 3                      | 1                 | 3                  | 3             |
| The duck is walking towards the girl.                                    | 1                      | 1                 | 1                  | 1             |
| The girl is wearing her new raincoat although she doesn’t need it.       | 2                      | 5                 | 4                  | 4             |
| He is ready to go to bed.                                                | 2                      | 4                 | 2                  | 1             |
| Mum asked: ‘Shouldn’t you wear a jacket?’                                | 1                      | 3                 | 4                  | 2             |
| The boy is being followed by the dog.                                    | 3                      | 1                 | 3                  | 3             |
| The girls have dressed for the game.          | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   |
| Mum said: ‘Please sweep the kitchen floor’. | 1   | 3   | 2   | 2   |
| The boy is going down the ramp.              | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   |
| The boy began gathering apples after they fell to the ground. | 2   | 5   | 3   | 4   |
| The boy will feed the cat.                   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   |
| The boy is washing dishes and his mum is drying them. | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   |
of pictures relevant to that item. We illustrate each of them in turn below. Note that permission to reproduce the visual prompts was not granted by Pearson, so we provide brief descriptions of the pictures instead in the figures below.

(9) Global inferences requiring to resolve
   a. the relative timing of events
   b. counterfactuals
   c. aspectual implications

  Figure 4 describes the picture prompts for items where the child needs to draw inferences that take into account the RELATIVE TIMING OF EVENTS: in the item depicted on the left, there needs to be apples on the ground indicating that their falling had started before the harvesting; in the item depicted on the right, future tense implies that the event has not started.

  Figure 5 describes the picture prompts for items where the child needs to compute COUNTERFACTUALS to draw the required inference: not being ready for school implies not being at school or on the way to school; being asked if one should wear a jacket implies one isn’t already wearing one.

  Figure 6 describes the picture prompts for items where the child needs to take ASPECTUAL DISTINCTIONS into account to draw the required inference: (1) having dressed for the match implies one is completely dressed; (2) to be going down a ramp implies that one has initiated the motion but not reached the end of the ramp.

  For validation, 7 independent raters were asked to code the SST items using the categories in (9).

  To complement the above, we also used an alternative estimate of cognitive complexity obtained by asking the 7 independent raters to assign each item with an overall score reflecting their own appraisal of the cognitive challenge posed by the item in question (on a 7-point scale). The evaluation required considering the four candidate pictures alongside the SST item, without specific instructions regarding the cognitive aspects to focus on. The intention here was to obtain a measure that would be more broadly encompassing than that based on global inferences.

  The consensus ratings are summarized in Table 9. Items were assigned to an inferential category if 70% (5/7) or more of the independent raters had suggested

![Picture descriptions](image-url)

Figure 4. Picture descriptions for: “The boy began gathering apples after they fell to the ground.” (left) and “He will feed the cat.” (right)
that category. The cognitive complexity score corresponds to the average score across raters. If either of these alternative predictors of cognitive complexity is on the right track, we can expect it to be negatively correlated (or negatively associated) with children’s SST accuracy scores.

Results

Structural complexity analysis

Children’s accuracy scores are plotted against each of the structural complexity predictors in Figure 7 (showing mean score and confidence interval for each structural complexity level, across the four operationalizations of structural complexity). The plots do not show the expected decline in performance as structural complexity increases, against our hypothesis (2-a). Given the violation of the basic assumption that performance will decline numerically as structural complexity increases, it does not make sense to perform a statistical analysis of the data.

A closer look at the monolinguals’ performance reveals some surprising results. Items with the most errors were among the least structurally complex. For instance, the mono-clausal and movement-free sentence in (10) (ranked lowest in structural complexity) was among the most challenging for children.
complexity across all relative clauses (11) (which the CELF manual itself singles out as particularly complex) were at ceiling (with 99% accuracy in the monolinguals).

(10) The boy will feed the cat. (63%)
The girl who is standing in front of the line is wearing a rucksack. (99%)

Performance also varied widely between structurally similar sentences, such as the ones in (12), featuring conjoined clauses and similar aspectual properties.

(12) a. The boy is washing dishes and his mum is drying them. (70%)

b. She is climbing and he is swinging. (87%)

Children’s performance thus appears to be affected by something other than structural complexity in a way that was not intended in the design, contrary to our second hypothesis (2-a). In the following section, we consider the relationship between cognitive demands and performance on the task.

Figure 8 shows children’s performance in the SST in relation with the two alternative predictors of cognitive complexity. The left panel shows a numerical trend for lower accuracy scores in items pertaining to the categories defined above (which we hypothesized involve inferencing difficulties). The right panel of Figure 8 shows a decrease in accuracy as cognitive complexity increases.

**Cognitive complexity analysis**

To evaluate the significance of our hypothetical predictor of inference complexity, we fitted a generalized linear regression model (with Participant as random effect) taking into account cognitive differences (DCCS, WM) and differences in terms of lexical semantic competence. Lexical semantic competence was measured by the
DELV, which was the closest to a vocabulary test in our battery. The models did not converge if Working Memory was included together with our inference complexity variable, or if the DCCS score (of cognitive flexibility) was included alongside the DELV proficiency score as predictor variables. As this could have been due to the attested colinearity between these two variables, we residualized the DELV scores against the DCCS score. The resulting measure (DELV.resid) allowed model convergence.

The summary for the optimal model is presented in Table 10. The three categories of Inference Complexity we postulated are associated with significantly lower performance compared with the baseline category (which includes all other items), over and above the significant effect of English proficiency (indexed by DELV.resid: the residualised lexical semantics score) and cognitive flexibility.

Likelihood ratio tests do not lend robust support for a difference between monolinguals and bilinguals when lexical semantic competence is taken into account (Chi-sq. = 3.15, p = 0.08). There was no model convergence if Inferencing Difficulty was allowed to interact with Bilingualism.

A similar pattern of results obtains using Cognitive Complexity as an alternative predictor (see Table 13 in the Appendix for the model summary).

We now turn to our third hypothesis (2-c), repeated here for ease of reference: “In bilingual children schooled in English, language exposure is expected to predict performance in English proficiency tests until a sufficient threshold of exposure has been reached. Some variability is expected across tests and language domains.”

**Predictors of performance across language proficiency tests**

We start by reporting the distribution of results across proficiency tests, comparing monolingual and bilingual performance at group level. Then we model performance in each test according to the same set of cognitive and environmental predictors.

The distribution of raw scores across proficiency tests is plotted in Figure 9. The scores express proportional accuracy for each child, with accuracy measured
according to the task’s protocol. From a purely distributional point of view, the four proficiency measures reveal a consistent pattern. As a group, the monolinguals performed significantly better than the bilinguals in each test: the Sentence Repetition test (Welch Two Sample t-test: $t = 4.7$, $p < .0001$), the Lexical Semantics tests (Welch Two Sample t-test: $t = 6.08$, $p < .0001$), the Discourse Semantics test (Welch Two Sample t-test: $t = 5.07$, $p < .0001$) and the CELF SST (Welch Two Sample t-test: $t = 5.67$, $p < .0001$).

To identify the significant predictors of proficiency as assessed by each test, we performed linear regression analyses on children’s overall score in each test, using the ‘lme4’ package (version 1.1.17) in R (version 3.5.0). The models were built by adding predictors incrementally, starting from a model with Gender only (as a control variable). A predictor was retained only if it improved the fit of the model, yielding a significant reduction in AIC$^8$ and a significant R-squared value for the model.$^9$ The model residuals (i.e., the observations not accounted for by the model) were checked for normality of distribution.

In all analyses, we tested whether the following variables were significant predictors: cumulative exposure to English, SES, short-term memory, working memory, cognitive flexibility, age and gender. All continuous variables were standardized so that the impact of the predictors can be compared within each model.$^{10}$

Table 11 summarizes the results of the linear regression model for each proficiency test. The predictors from the optimal models are in bold. The statistics for non-significant predictors (not bolded in the table) were computed by adding each predictor in turn to the optimal model.

Cumulative exposure to English is a significant predictor of proficiency in all but the CELF SST (where it does not even approach significance: $p = 0.86$). In all tests, one or more cognitive factors account for a significant amount of variability in the data (reflecting the cognitive demands of the task). In the CELF SST, only the cognitive factors are significant predictors of children’s accuracy, i.e., Working Memory and

---

$^8$The fit of a model estimates how closely it matches the observed values in the dataset. The Akaike Information Criterion is an estimate of the model fit, penalized for over-fitting (i.e., the inclusion of too many parameters). The smaller the AIC, the better the model.

$^9$The R-squared of a model expresses how much variance is captured by the model.

$^{10}$Standardized scores, also known as z-scores, are scaled so that they have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

---

Table 10. Fixed-effect coefficients of the optimal Generalized Linear Mixed-Effect Model predicting the likelihood of a correct response in the CELF SST based on inferencing difficulty. Random effect: Participant

| Coefficient       | Std.Error | Z    | p     |
|-------------------|-----------|------|-------|
| Intercept         | $-0.34$   | $0.20$ | $-1.71$ | $0.0866$ |
| Cognitive flexibility | $0.85$   | $0.07$ | $11.60$ | $< .0001$ |
| Residualized Lexical semantics score | $3.21$   | $0.41$ | $7.83$ | $< .0001$ |
| Difficulty: Aspect | $-0.38$  | $0.09$ | $-4.17$ | $< .0001$ |
| Difficulty: Counterfactuals | $-0.30$  | $0.13$ | $-2.28$ | $0.0227$ |
| Difficulty: Relative events | $-1.44$  | $0.12$ | $-12.05$ | $< .0001$ |
| Gender            | $0.10$    | $0.10$ | $1.01$ | $0.3119$ |

---

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000920000823 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Cognitive Flexibility. This is at odds with all the other proficiency tests in our battery, against hypothesis (2-c).

Discussion
Our item analysis of the CELF SST aimed to disentangle the effect of structural complexity from the cognitive demands of the task. Structural complexity is not clearly defined in the manual, so we proposed four alternative operationalizations, based on (i) syntactic properties, (ii) age of acquisition, (iii) clausal structure and (iv) expert ratings. None of them was found to correlate with SST accuracy scores in our study. Instead, it seems that the cognitive complexity of the task masked children’s syntactic abilities. The task requires the child to compare four pictures and draw inferences from the information presented visually to choose the picture that best matches the verbal prompt. It appears the complexity associated with that process was not sufficiently controlled across items, and resulted in a confounding factor. Our attempt at identifying sources of difficulties in visual inferencing was clearly tentative, and we do not want to claim that our hypothetical categories define the source of inferencing difficulty with enough precision. For instance, the salience of

Figure 9. Pirate plots for individual mean scores across proficiency tests in monolinguals and bilinguals: target structure accuracy in the Sentence Repetition (top left), and response accuracy in the four Lexical Semantics tests (top right), the Discourse Semantics test (bot- tom left) and the CELF Sentence Structure test (bottom right). Each plot shows group mean (thick line), confidence intervals (lighter area around the mean) and 10% and 90% quantiles (whiskers).
Table 11. Effect of the (scaled) predictors of English proficiency scores in the bilingual children across domains. T-values represent the coefficients divided by their Standard Error. Results from the optimal models are in bold face (except for Gender, which was included as a control variable in all models).

| Predictor                        | Sentence repetition | Lexical semantics | Discourse semantics | CELF SST |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------|
|                                  | t                   | p                 | t                   | p        | t       | p     | t       | p        | t       | p     | t       | p        |
| Cumulative English exposure      | 3.75                | 0.0003            | 2.37                | 0.02     | 2.62    | 2.62  | 0.18    | 0.86     |
| SES                              | 2.08                | 0.04              | 2.09                | 0.04     | 3.01    | 3.01  | 1.22    | 0.23     |
| Short term memory                | 2.99                | 0.0037            | 2.16                | 0.034    | −0.61   | −0.61 | 0.82    | 0.41     |
| Working memory                   | −0.7                | 0.48              | 2.12                | 0.0375   | 0.87    | 0.87  | 3.55    | 0.006     |
| Cognitive flexibility            | 2.02                | 0.05              | 3.58                | 0.0006   | 3.31    | 3.31  | 6.83    | 0.00000001|
| Gender                           | −1.04               | 0.3               | −0.98               | 0.33     | −0.51   | −0.51 | 0.96    | 0.34     |
key pictorial information was not taken into account in our exploration. However, our
hypothetical categories of sources of inferencing difficulty did correlate significantly
with SST accuracy scores—an effect not intended by design.

Unsurprisingly, these inferencing difficulty categories do overlap with structure
complexity to some extent. For instance, some items requiring difficult inferences
include adjunct clauses (as in (1-a) or (13)), which have been shown to be difficult
to interpret by children in the age range considered here (Blything & Cain, 2019; de
Ruiter et al., 2017).

(13) The boy began gathering apples after they fell to the ground.

Importantly, however, the overlap between structural and inferential complexity is
only partial: the Aspect category features the structurally simplest items; and items
with relative clauses (which should be among the most complex from a structural
point of view) are part of the baseline in terms of inferential complexity. Indeed, in
the relative clause examples, it seems possible for the child to identify the correct
picture without having to compute the relative clause, and just by combining the
properties of the head noun and the lexical items in the relative clause. This is likely
to explain the very high scores in the items featuring that structure.

Language exposure does not predict bilingual children’s performance in the SST. This
is at odds with the other English proficiency tests, where environmental factors are
significant determinants: both cumulative exposure to English and socio-economic
status have an impact on response accuracy, in exactly the same group of children. In
principle, as pointed out by a reviewer, this could be explained by the fact that the
effect of language exposure varies across linguistic domains and modalities (Paradis &
Jia, 2017; Schulz & Grimm, 2019) and by the importance of other factors such as
socio-economic disadvantage (see e.g., Andersson et al., 2019). If that interpretation is
on the right track, the lack of impact of language exposure on this measure of
receptive syntax might be considered a potentially positive result for the assessment of
bilinguals: it would be a sign that bias has been avoided in this standardized test, in
spite of it having been normed with monolinguals. Two observations guard us against
that interpretation, however. First, the exact same children’s performance on the
sentence repetition test manipulating structural complexity was very strongly predicted
by their language exposure.11 While discrepancies between receptive and productive
measures are not uncommon, a difference of this magnitude is surprising. Second, if
we interpret the disproportionate magnitude of the impact of cognitive predictors as
an indication that the SST measures verbal reasoning more than the mastery of
structural aspects of language, the lack of impact of cumulative English exposure
becomes entirely unsurprising. Indeed, the cumulative amount of English experience is
not negatively correlated with cognitive performance in this group of bilingual
children.12 And it is children’s cognitive abilities, dissociated from their language

11The amount of exposure to English in school has also been shown by Paradis, Rusk, Duncan &
Govindarajan (2017) to be a significant predictor of L2 children’s production of complex sentences,
along with the richness of their English L2 environment, larger L2 vocabularies, and superior verbal
memory and analytic reasoning.

12Cumulative exposure to the school and societal language (English) in this group of heritage speakers
(of another language) did not predict the bilingual children’s working memory scores nor their cognitive
flexibility scores, but it did predict their inhibition scores (De Cat, Gusnanto & Serratrice, 2018).
exposure profiles, which best predict their performance in the SST. Poorer SST performance of bilingual children compared with monolinguals at group level is not explained by lower cognitive abilities (at least not working memory, cognitive flexibility or inhibition), but by their lexical competence (as indexed by their residual DELV scores, which proved to be a significant predictor).

In light of the above, we attribute the discrepancy between children’s performance in the sentence repetition task (SRep) and the sentence comprehension task (SST) to the impact of cognitive confounds in the CELF SST task: the children’s SST score reflects their inferential abilities more than their ability to comprehend complex structures. This in turn explains the lack of predictability of English language exposure of the bilinguals’ SST score. Notably, inferential complexity did not affect bilinguals significantly more than monolinguals, and the overall difference between the two groups became non-significant once lexical semantic scores were included as a predictor (see also Oller, Pearson, & Cobo-Lewis, 2007).

Our findings are in line with Frizelle et al. (2019), who demonstrate that the picture-choice method to test complex sentence comprehension under-estimates children’s linguistic competence and reveals a different order of difficulty compared with a less cognitively demanding test. They conclude that “the multiple-choice picture-matching assessment method…tests skills beyond those of linguistic competence” (p. 277).

We conclude from this investigation that the CELF SST does not sufficiently dissociate the impact of structural complexity from the impact of complex reasoning on children’s sentence comprehension, and should therefore not be considered a reliable independent measure of receptive syntax in psycholinguistic research.

A final caveat is required, however: for assessment of language disorders, the heavy cognitive demands in the SST, even if they mask structural complexity, might still make this a reasonable choice for assessment with bilinguals. This is because children with language disorders (particularly DLD) show cognitive deficits, especially in performance on language tasks (Tomas & Vissers, 2019).

Acknowledgements. The original data were collected as part of a project funded by the Leverhulme Trust (RPG-2012-633), which is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks to the researchers who participated in the two rating surveys to inform our measures. Special thanks to the reviewers for their insightful and challenging comments, and for making us consider the clinical point of view.

The code and data are accessible via the Open Science Foundation https://osf.io/qaw3b/

References

Andersson, K., Hansson, K., Rosqvist, I., Lyberg Åhlander, V., Sahlén, B., & Sandgren, O. (2019). The contribution of bilingualism, parental education, and school characteristics to performance on the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals: Fourth edition, Swedish. Frontiers in Psychology, 10, 1586. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01586

Armon-Lotem, S., de Jong, J., & Meir, N. (2015). Methods for assessing multilingual children: Disentangling bilingualism from language impairment. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Baddeley, A. (2000). The episodic buffer: A new component of working memory? Trends Cognitive Science, 4, 417–423. doi: 10.1016/S1364-6613(00)01538-2

Barac, R., & Bialystok, E. (2012). Bilingual effects on cognitive and linguistic development: Role of language, cultural background, and education. Child Development, 83, 413–422. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01707.x

Blything, L. P., & Cain, K. (2019). The role of memory and language ability in children’s production of two-clause sentences containing ‘before’ and ‘after’. Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 182, 61–85. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2019.01.011
Marinis, T., Chiat, S., Armon-Lotem, S., Gibbons, D., & Gipps, E. (2010). School-Age Sentence Imitation Test (SASIT). Reading: University of Reading.

Montgomery, J., Magimairaj, B., & O’Malley, M. (2008). Role of working memory in typically developing children’s complex sentence comprehension. Journal of Psycholinguistic Research, 37, 331–354. doi: 10.1007/s10396-008-9077-z

Montrul, S. (2016). The acquisition of heritage languages. Cambridge: CUP.

Oakhill, J., & Cain, K. (2018). Children’s problems with inference making: Causes and consequences. Bulletin of Educational Psychology, 49, 683–699.

Oller, D. K., Pearson, B. Z., & Cobo-Lewis, A. B. (2007). Profile effects in early bilingual language and literacy. Applied Psycholinguistics, 28, 191–230. doi: 10.1017/S0142716407070117

Paradis, J. (2019). English second language acquisition from early childhood to adulthood: The role of age, first language, cognitive, and input factors. In Proceedings of the BUCLD (Vol. 43, p. 11–26).

Paradis, J., Crago, M., Genesee, F., & Rice, M. (2003). French-English bilingual children with SLI: How do they compare with their monolingual peers? Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 46, 113–127. doi: 10.1044/1092-4388(2003/009)

Paradis, J., & Jia, R. (2017). Bilingual children’s long-term outcomes in English as a second language: language environment factors shape individual differences in catching up with monolinguals. Developmental Science, 20, e12433.

Paradis, J., Rusk, B., Duncan, T. S., & Govindarajan, K. (2017). Children’s second language acquisition of English complex syntax: The role of age, input, and cognitive factors. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 37, 148–167. doi: 10.1017/S0267190517000022

Rosenberg, S., & Abbeduto, L. (1987). Indicators of linguistic competence in the peer group conversational behavior of mildly retarded adults. Applied Psycholinguistics, 8, 19–32.

Schulz, P., & Grimm, A. (2019). The age factor revisited: Timing in acquisition interacts with age of onset in bilingual acquisition. Frontiers in Psychology, 9, 2732. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02732

Semel, E., Wiig, E., & Secord, W. (2006). Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (Fourth ed.). London: Harcourt Assessment.

Serratrvice, L., & De Cat, C. (2020). Individual differences in the production of referential expressions: The effect of language proficiency, language exposure and executive function in bilingual and monolingual children. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 23, 371–386. doi: 10.1017/S1366728918000962

Seymour, H. N., Rooper, T., & de Villiers, J. (2005). DELV-NR (Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation) Norm-Referenced Test. San Antonio TX: The Psychological Corporation.

Tager-Flusberg, H., & Sullivan, K. (1994). A second look at second-order belief attribution in autism. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 24, 577–586. doi: 10.1007/BF02172139

Thornton, R., & Tesan, G. (2013). Sentential negation in early child English. Journal of Linguistics, 49, 367–411. doi: 10.1017/S0022226712000382

Tomas, E., & Vissers, C. (2019). Behind the scenes of developmental language disorder: Time to call neuropsychology back on stage. Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, 12. doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2018.00517

Unsworth, S. (2013). Assessing the role of current and cumulative exposure in simultaneous bilingual acquisition: The case of Dutch gender. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 16, 86–110. doi: 10.1017/S1366728912000028

van der Lely, H. (1996). Specifically language impaired and normally developing children: Verbal passive vs. adjectival passive sentence interpretation. Lingua, 98, 243–272. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-3841(95)00044-5

Van Valin, R. D. Jr. (2001). The acquisition of complex sentences: A case study in the role of theory in the study of language development. Chicago Linguistic Society Parasession, 36, 511–531.

Vasilyeva, M., Waterfall, H., & Huttenlocher, J. (2008). Emergence of syntax: Commonalities and differences across children. Developmental science, 11, 84–97.

Wechsler, D. (1991). WISC-III: Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children: Manual. San Antonio, TX: Psychological Corporation, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Zelazo, P. (2006). The Dimensional Change Card Sort (DCCS): A method of assessing executive function in children. Nature Protocols, 1, 297–301. doi: 10.1038/nprot.2006.46
## Table 12. LITMUS Sentence Repetition Items, by difficulty level

| Level 1 | Sentence                                                                                       |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|         | The boy must sweep the floor in the kitchen.                                                   |
|         | They are eating the bananas in the park. She can bring the glass to the table.                |
|         | She was stopped at the big red lights. The children were taken to the office. He was           |
|         | pushed hard against the ground. What did the princess buy last month.                          |
|         | What did the father cook in the evening. Who have they seen near the steps.                    |
|         | Who did the monkey splash near the water.                                                      |
|         |                                                                                               |
|         | The policeman has been looking at us.                                                          |
|         | The kitten could have hit the ball down the stairs. They have been riding the goat             |
|         | around the garden. The cow was kicked in the leg by the donkey.                                |
|         | She was seen by the doctor in the morning. She went to the nurse because she was sick.         |
|         | He will feed the cow before he waters the plants. The child ate breakfast after he             |
|         | washed his face. The mother was followed by the girl.                                          |
|         | Which picture did he paint at home yesterday. Which drink did the milkman spill in the house.  |
|         |                                                                                               |
|         | The boy that the milkman helped has lost his way.                                               |
|         | If the kids behave we will go into the garden.                                                 |
|         | The people will get a present if they clean the house. He wouldn’t have brought his friend if  |
|         | she was nasty.                                                                                |
|         | The children enjoyed the sweets that they tasted.                                              |
|         | The mum bakes the meal that the children are eating. He should wash the baby                   |
|         | that the child is patting.                                                                    |
|         | The bee that the man swallowed had hurt him.                                                   |
|         | The horse that the farmer pushed kicked him in the back.                                       |

## Table 13. Fixed-effect coefficients of a Generalized Linear Mixed-Effect Model predicting the likelihood of a correct response in the CELF SST based on cognitive complexity. Random effect: Participant. Statistical significance obtains from an absolute t-value of 2.

|                      | Coefficient | Std.Error | t-value |
|----------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| Intercept            | 0.66        | 0.04      | 15.73   |
| Cognitive flexibility| 0.13        | 0.01      | 10.91   |
| Residualized Lexical semantics score | 0.46 | 0.07 | 6.87 |
| Cognitive complexity | −0.06 | 0.01 | −9.60 |
| Group: Bilingual     | −0.03       | 0.02      | −1.90   |
| Gender               | 0.02        | 0.02      | 1.05    |

Cite this article: De Cat C, Melia T (2022). What does the Sentence Structure component of the CELF-IV index, in monolinguals and bilinguals? *Journal of Child Language* 49, 423–450. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000920000823