Naturalistic and Non-Interactive Bilingualism in Autism: Evidence Across the Spectrum from Minimal Speech to Fluent Language

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Bilingualism is part of everyday life for many children worldwide, including autistic children. Converging longitudinal and review evidence demonstrates that bilingual exposure does not hinder language or social development in autism and may even support communicative engagement (e.g., Meir & Novogrodsky, 2025). Importantly, bilingualism is not a uniform experience. Children acquire multiple languages through different pathways, including naturalistic bilingualism, grounded in social interaction at home and school (e.g., Paradis, 2023; Armon-Lotem & Meir, 2019), and non-interactive bilingualism, in which exposure occurs primarily through digital input with limited reciprocal use.

In this talk, I present a series of studies comparing autistic children across the spectrum (from minimally speaking to fluent speakers), who acquire their languages via interactive versus non-interactive routes. Across domains of grammar, lexicon, and narrative abilities, verbal autistic children exposed to non-interactive bilingual input do not differ from their peers who acquire their languages naturalistically (e.g., Hindi & Meir, 2025). Crucially, our recent findings show that these similarities extend to minimally speaking children, whose receptive and expressive vocabularies may approximate those of monolingual autistic peers despite reduced input. Theoretically, these findings invite a refinement of interaction-based models of bilingual development by highlighting the role of exposure pathways in autism. Clinically, our findings make a strong case for assessing and supporting all languages to which an autistic child is exposed, suggesting that effective intervention should be guided by the child's language profile rather than assumptions about how those languages were acquired.