

## **Variation and Instability in Bilingual Speakers: Seeing both the Forest and the Trees**

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Recent research has focused on the concept of ‘interface’ between syntax and other cognitive systems as a predominant locus of instability in bilingual speakers. I will address the question of what causes instability in (some) interface domains in the light of three emerging patterns. First, some specific interface constructions have been found to be unstable in different bilingual populations, such as early simultaneous bilingual children, near-native L2 speakers, and L1 speakers affected by attrition from a second language. Second, some interfaces have been shown to present instability independently of the degree of typological relatedness between the two languages known by bilingual speakers; other interfaces, in contrast, are problematic only for speakers of particular language combinations. Third, some interface constructions also present instability in monolingual native speakers, albeit in more restricted circumstances. These patterns suggest that further distinctions should be made among interfaces and among causes of interface instability. They also indicate that we should find ways of distinguishing – theoretically and methodologically – between representational and processing effects, on the one hand, and between crosslinguistic influence and general consequences of having two languages, on the other. Finally, these patterns make it clear that no linguistic theory can - by itself -account for bilingual language development: we need strongly interdisciplinary models based on experimental evidence.