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Childhood stuttering and dissociations across linguistic domains

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to evaluate the possible presence of dissociations in the speech and language skills of young children who do (CWS) and do not stutter (CWNS) using a correlation-based statistical procedure [Bates, E., Appelbaum, M., Salcedo, J., Saygin, A. P., & Pizzamiglio, L. (2003). Quantifying dissociations in neuropsychological research. *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology*, 25, 1128–1153]. Participants were 45 preschool CWS and 45 CWNS between the ages of 3;0 and 5;11 (years;months), with the two groups matched by age, gender, race, and parental socioeconomic status. Children participated in a parent–child interaction for the purpose of disfluency analysis and responded to four standardized speech-language tests for subsequent analyses as main dependent variables. Findings indicated that CWS were over three times more likely than CWNS to exhibit dissociations across speech-language domains, with 44 cases of dissociation for CWS and 14 for CWNS across 10 possible comparisons. Results suggest that there may be a subgroup of CWS who exhibit dissociations across speech-language domains, which may result in a greater susceptibility to breakdowns in speech fluency.

Educational objectives: The reader will be able to: (1) summarize findings from previous studies examining differences in speech and language performance between children who do and do not stutter; (2) describe what is meant by “dissociations” in the speech and language skills of young

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children who do and do not stutter; and (3) discuss three hypotheses that could account for the present findings that suggest CWS, more often than CWNS, exhibit dissociations in their speech-language system.

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The issue of whether children who stutter (CWS) differ from children who do not stutter (CWNS) in terms of linguistic abilities has been a topic of much interest and controversy (see [Ratner, 1997](#) for review). However, findings from descriptive studies of the speech and language abilities of CWS have been less than consistent. On the one hand, some literature reviews and empirical studies have suggested that CWS may have less developed phonology, vocabulary, or overall language abilities than their normally-fluent peers ([Anderson & Conture, 2000, 2004](#); [Byrd & Cooper, 1989](#); [Louko, Conture, & Edwards, 1999](#); [Paden, Yairi, & Ambrose, 1999](#); [Pellowski, Conture, Anderson, & Ohde, 2001](#); [Silverman & Ratner, 2002](#)). On the other hand, some empirical studies have found no evidence to suggest that the speech or language abilities of CWS are less robust than those of CWNS (e.g., see [Nippold, 2002](#) for review). For example, [Howell, Davis, and Au-Yeung \(2003\)](#) reported that CWS and CWNS (aged 2–10 years) performed similarly on the Reception of Syntax Test, a measure of syntactic development. To further challenge any clear-cut interpretation of this area of empirical investigation, some studies have reported that CWS may have above average expressive language abilities relative to their developmental expectations ([Watkins & Yairi, 1997](#); [Watkins, Yairi, & Ambrose, 1999](#)).

Nevertheless, despite apparent differences in findings among descriptive studies of the speech and language abilities of CWS, most would appear to agree that the linguistic characteristics associated with instances of stuttering are relatively consistent in their distribution and loci. That is, instances of stuttering exhibited by CWS tend to occur on (a) low frequency words ([Anderson, 2005](#); [Soderberg, 1966](#); [Palen & Peterson, 1982](#)), (b) first three words of an utterance ([Bernstein, 1981](#); [Howell & Au-Yeung, 1995](#); [Wall, Starkweather, & Cairns, 1981](#)), (c) function words ([Bernstein, 1981](#); [Bloodstein & Grossman, 1981](#); [Graham, Conture, & Camarata, 2005](#); [Howell, Au-Yeung, & Sackin, 1999](#); [Natke, Sandreiser, van Ark, Pietrowsky, & Kalveram, 2004](#)), and (d) longer or more syntactically complex utterances ([Ratner & Sih, 1987](#); [Howell & Au-Yeung, 1995](#); [Kadi-Hanifi & Howell, 1992](#); [Logan & Conture, 1995, 1997](#); [Melnick & Conture, 2000](#); [Yaruss, 1999](#)). These linguistic factors have also been shown to influence the fluency with which words are produced in adolescents and adults who stutter (e.g., [Bergmann, 1986](#); [Brown, 1945](#); [Danzger & Halpern, 1973](#); [Hubbard & Prins, 1994](#); [Klouda & Cooper, 1988](#); [Natke, Grosser, Sandreiser, & Kalveram, 2002](#); [Prins, Hubbard, & Krause, 1991](#); [Ronson, 1976](#); [Wingate, 1984](#)). However, unlike young CWS, older children and adults tend to stutter more on content words than function words (e.g., [Brown, 1938a,b](#); [Dayalu, Kalinowski, Stuart, Holbert, & Rastatter, 2002](#); [Howell et al., 1999](#)). Taken together, the relatively consistent association observed between certain utterance characteristics and the loci of stuttering seems to suggest that there may be an interaction between linguistic processing and instances of stuttering.

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