

BILINGUALISM

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ABSTRACT

In most common definition a bilingual is a person who is able to speak and understand two languages. Most of us consider bilingualism as something good, an advantage. For one thing, knowledge of another language enables people to communicate with members of other cultures in their own language. This, in turn, provides a means for furthering cooperation and understanding among nations and peoples. Then rise some questions considering bilingualism such as: Is it a good idea to become a bilingual? Just what is a bilingual? Should a young child learn a second language? When should that be? How might learning a second language be affected by the first? These are questions which people and scientists commonly raise. This literature-based article will attempt to provide answers that offer some insight into these questions and other issues related to bilingualism.

Key words: *bilingualism, first language, second language.*

A. KINDS OF BILINGUALISM

1. Any Two Languages: Speech, Sign, or Written

To begin with, it would be useful to consider just what the term 'bilingualism' includes. Most people would think of a bilingual as a person who is able to speak and understand two languages (languages like English and Russian, or Chinese and Arabic). Beyond this, there might be varieties of bilinguals which would strike many people as odd at first. On second thought it would be realized that there are people who, besides an ordinary speech-type language, also know a *sign* language, such as British Sign Language or Swedish Sign Language, which are true languages. Moreover, there are people who can read a second language fluently even write it well, but who cannot speak or understand its spoken form to any significant degree. These people have not learned reading but they have learned a language in the *written* mode.

Because language in all its complexity can be acquired through a variety of modalities i.e., sound (speech), sight (writing), and visual motion (signs) – an adequate concept of a bilingual should allow for any of these realizations. Thus, it can be said that a person is bilingual if he or she knows: (1) two languages in the

same modality, for example, two speech-based languages such as spoken English and spoken German, or two sign-based languages such as American Sign Language and Japanese Sign Language, or (2) two languages based on *different modalities*, e.g., spoken German and American Sign Language, or spoken French and written Sanskrit.

There is no good reason to exclude any of these combinations from the label of bilingualism. Any discussion of bilingualism, however, should make clear just what modalities are being considered. Because the languages that are most involved in research in bilingualism are mostly ones that are speech-based, the discussion presented in this article will focus on the modality of speech. Conclusions that are drawn for speech-based languages, may generally be extended to languages based on other modalities as well.

2. Proficiency in the second /language

Proficiency in the second language may be evaluated with respect to a variety of variables, including knowledge of syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation (signing or writing for non-speech). Just how much of a second language does one have to know before one can be considered proficient in it? While there are standardized tests available for many languages, researchers typically establish their own criteria study by study. In everyday life though we often designate a person as a bilingual even if he or she does not attain native speaker levels in the second language. Additionally, a bilingual's language skills may vary across modalities as he or she may write well in one language but speak better in the other. Typically, the bilingual's second language is of lower proficiency than the first.

3. Bidialectalism

Many people probably would not want to regard as bilingual someone who knows two dialects of the same language, e.g. British Yorkshire English and American Midwestern English. While these dialects differ in significant respects, the differences are not so great that linguists consider them separate languages. The accepted term bidialectalism seems to best describe this phenomenon.

However, since the gap between two dialects may often be quite wide, to that extent we may relate bidialectalism to bilingualism. Thus many of the concerns that are raised for bilingualism can be extended to bidialectalism as well.

B. IS BILINGUALISM BENEFICIAL OR DETRIMENTAL?

1. Bilingualism and Society

Most people consider bilingualism as something good, an advantage. For one thing, knowledge of another language enables people to communicate with members of other cultures in their own language. This, in turn, provides a means for furthering cooperation and understanding among nations and peoples. Knowing another language is also important with in countries where there is more than one prevalent or official language, as in Switzerland, which has four official languages: German, French, Italian, Romansh. Most Swiss learn to speak fluently at least two of these languages plus English. Multilingualism can work if the different peoples want it to work. In Canada, however, where there are two official languages, English and French, the minority French speakers are divided as to whether they wish to stay within the Canadian federation or to establish a separate state. It was not simply due to chance that the development of successful bilingual 'immersion' programs ('bilingual education' in the USA) in North America began in French speaking Quebec, where English-speaking parents, wanted their children to be fluent in the dominant language of the province, French (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). French was (and still is) the language that is necessary for integration and advancement. The opposite is the case in the other provinces, where English is the dominant language.

Language can be used as an instrument of national policy. Forbidding the public use of a language, such as in newspapers, books, or newscasts, and forbidding the formal teaching of a language is what governments can do in order to weaken the coherence of a cultural group so as to force integration. For example, this is the situation in Turkey where Turkish Kurds cannot publicly promote their language, while in both the USA and Canada native Indian children were not permitted to use their language in the schools. In many states of the USA after World War I, the teaching of a foreign language was banned because the

knowledge of that language was regarded as potentially detrimental to young children's cultural values. A common language is one important aspect of the cohesion of a people.

At a personal level, the pleasure and cultural benefits of bilingualism, too, are obvious. Who would not like to be able to travel around the world, to Paris, Moscow, Helsinki, Shanghai, or Tokyo, and be able to talk with the people there in their own language? What lovers of movies and theatre would *not* like to understand performances in the original language? This being the case, where then is the controversy? How can one reasonably be against bilingualism, aside from political considerations. First, it must be said that the arguments offered against bilingualism are restricted to young children learning a second language. Allowing teenagers and adults to learn a second language is considered safe. Many people believe that if a second language is learned at an early age, it can be harmful in two main respects: (1) the learning of the second language would retard or negatively influence the learning of the native language, and (2) it would intellectually retard the development of thinking and such cognitive capacities as mathematics and reading. Secondly, it must be said that the criticism that has been leveled against early bilingualism is primarily of another era, the early half of the twentieth century. That was a time when conceptions and experimental methodology involving language and intelligence were at a rather naive level and when the mood in America (where most of the research was done) was one of isolationism and a wariness of foreign influences. With the advent of the ethnic pride movements in the *1960s*, both in America and Europe, along with the increased wealth that allowed ordinary people to travel to foreign lands, attitude towards foreign languages changed significantly to the positive.

2. Effects on First-Language Development

The issue here is whether learning a second language at an early age, while the child is still in the process of acquiring the native or first language, has a negative effect on acquisition of the native language. There is the concern that bilingualism might somehow retard first- or even second-language development with the result that, for example, a child raised with two languages might never

really learn either language as well as would monolingual speakers of those languages. This is a legitimate empirical question and one to which researchers have addressed themselves.

a. Negative reports

The most well-known and influential piece of research for its time was that of Madorah Smith, back in the *1930s*. Smith (1939) gathered comparative data on the language of pre-school children in Iowa, where she did her graduate work, and in Hawaii, where she went to teach. The Iowa children were essentially white and monolingually English while the Hawaii children were ethnically diverse, of Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Japanese, Korean, and Portuguese parentage, and bilingual, with English as one of their languages. Smith recorded sentences uttered by the children and evaluated the sentences in terms of Standard English usage. The principal finding was that the bilingual children from Hawaii had many more errors in their English speech than did their Iowa counterparts. This led Smith to conclude that bilingualism caused retard action in language development.

However, by defining errors the way she did, Smith could not help but come up with the results that she did. For the children in Hawaii in general spoke the dialect of English that was prevalent there, which was not the standard English spoken by the children from Iowa. Smith's bias is reminiscent of the later work of researchers such as Bereiter and Engelman (1966) and Basil Bernstein (1960, 1961) in the *1960s*, who claimed that non-standard speakers of English - in particular, inner-city African-Americans in the USA and working-class whites in Britain - had poor language knowledge compared to Standard English speakers. The brilliant work of Labov (1970) and other linguistic researchers in the 1960s and 1970s, however, conclusively demonstrated that non-standard dialects of English are every bit as complex as standard dialects (as typified by Midwest speech in America, for example) and are linguistically comparable. Smith's work has other serious methodological problems as well, particularly the inadequate matching of monolinguals and bilinguals in terms of their families' socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

b. Positive reports

More sophisticated investigations comparing the linguistic skills of monolinguals and bilinguals have been made by Lambert and his associates in Canada, where English and French are the official languages. Many of their research studies involved children in so-called 'language immersion' programs. In these programs, children are immersed, so to speak, in the second language, and are further exposed to a substantial amount of academic instruction in that second language for such fields of knowledge as mathematics, science, social studies, and language skills. Actually, there is a wide variety of types of immersion programs. Examples are (1) *Total Early Immersion*, where all courses are taught in the second language and first language literacy is delayed, (2) *Delayed Immersion*, where the second language is not used for course work until first-language literacy has been well established, and (3) *Late Immersion*, where the second language is not used for teaching content courses until the end of elementary school (Genesee, 1987).

One long-term study by Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker (1976) with native English-speaking children in a French immersion program found that, by the fourth or fifth grade, the second-language French skills, including reading and writing, were almost as good as those of native French-speaking children. Importantly, all of this was achieved at no loss to their English native language development (as compared to a control group of English monolingual children). In addition, the immersion group did better than the English monolingual group on creativity tests. In many cases, their mathematics and science scores were also higher. Similar research has strengthened these findings. Immersion students perform in English at the same levels as other students except on tests requiring English literacy skills (Genesee, 1983; Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Swain & Lapkin, 1982). This is to be expected since they do not learn to read until later in the program. When they do learn literacy skills, they catch up with their peers within a year.

Other research shows that early immersion students achieve levels of second-language proficiency that are far beyond other second-language programs and in some areas are equal to the proficiency of native speakers (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998). In a thorough review of the research on immersion, Genesee (1987) found that students in early immersion program did not differ from native French speakers on tests of listening comprehension and oral expression.

However, other research demonstrates that in some aspects these students do not achieve native levels in productive skills such as speaking and writing (Lapkin, Swain, & Shapson, 1990). This may be because they are only exposed to classroom language. The classroom does not provide a full range of language input as would be possible in a natural setting. Additionally, because of classroom dynamics in which the teacher does most of the talking, students do not have the opportunities for producing the kind of language that natural language learners have. Without a great degree of interaction with native speakers over a long period of time, native-speaker proficiency is not easily achievable by those attempting to become bilingual solely through classroom education (Tarone & Swain, 1995; Yeoman, 1996).

C. SEQUENTIAL AND SIMULTANEOUS LEARNING SITUATIONS

There are essentially two conditions according to which a person may become bilingual: (1) the two languages can be acquired *sequentially*, such as the second language being learned later at school, or (2) *simultaneously*, such as where the young child is exposed to two different languages in the home at the same time. Simultaneous learning, by its very nature, is thus for children only. On the other hand, sequential learning can occur with both children and adults; the second language can be learned during lower-level schooling, e.g. elementary school, or it can be learned after the person has become an adult, e.g. at university or in another country.

1. Sequential Learning of Two Languages

The sequential kind of bilingual situation can occur for a child when the child learns a second language at school. This is a common enough situation which most of us are familiar with and hence needs little amplification.

a. First language in the home, second language in the community

More interesting is the fairly typical case where parents speak one language and the community at large speaks another. The parents could be immigrants, foreign residents, or simply people who have moved from one part of a country to another part, such as from English-speaking Toronto to French speaking Quebec City. The parents speak one language at home, which is different from the one their children are exposed to outside the home, on the streets or at school. Sequential acquisition of the second language may take place at a variety of ages and under a variety of situations. Consider, for example, an immigrant couple who have come to America from China with their 4-year-old daughter. They send their daughter to an English-speaking pre-school but they continue to speak only Chinese at home. By the time the child is 5 years old, she is speaking fluent English with her playmates and teachers while continuing to speak Chinese at home with her parents. Her English is as good as the English of her friends. The child has thus learned two languages, Chinese and English, sequentially; with the second language being introduced after a great deal of the first language had been learned. Although the child begins learning English, Chinese continues to be learned from her parents at home. From this point on, the learning of the two languages will be occurring simultaneously. What is sequential is the different starting time, with a four -year gap before the introduction of the second language.

b. Development of a second language

In sequential bilingualism young children pass through four common stages (Tabors & Snow, (99 4): (1) Children attempt to use the language learned at home with other children in the wider community where a different language is used. As they come to understand that others do not understand their home language, they give up trying to communicate in the home language outside of the home. They

are *silent*. (2) They abandon their home language in favor of communication through *gesture*. Children at this point are beginning to comprehend some of the second language. (3) The children begin to use the second language in ways similar to children learning a first language. They *produce abbreviated utterances* without function words as in the telegraphic speech of first-language learners. (4) Finally, they begin to *produce grammatical utterances* in appropriate situations.

In either type of bilingualism, simultaneous or sequential, native-speaker levels are rarely attained for both languages. One language is usually dominant, although different languages may be dominant in different modalities, one language being more proficient for oral communication while the other language is used for reading and writing. The dominant language may also change over time. The home language may start out as the dominant language, but the second language may achieve dominance as it is used for wider communication. It is this dominant language that typically becomes more developed.

c. Young children can learn a second language faster than the first

Before continuing on to the case of simultaneous learning, it is important to note that it is often the case that young children can learn an entire language in a year or less. It is not uncommon to hear of a 4-year-old child picking up a language in six months in a foreign country. In Japan, we have seen many a 4- and 5-year-old interpreting for their embarrassed American or British parents in shops and in other situations. This is truly amazing. Theoretically, it must be the case that *the learning of a second language is facilitated by the prior learning of the first language*. As the child gets older, however, the time needed for second language acquisition grows longer.

2. Simultaneous Learning

One person speaks one language only, or, one person speaks two languages

There are two basic situations in which a child may learn two (or more) languages at the same time: (1) Each person speaks one language only to the child: *One Person-One Language*, or (2) Each person speaks the same two languages to the child: *One Person-Two Languages*. Typical of the first case is

when the mother speaks one language while the father speaks another. Or it can be a frequent baby-sitter or other family member who speaks the other language. Each person uses one language exclusively. For example, the mother might speak to the child only in Spanish while the father speaks to the child only in English. This is the one-person uses-one-language-only situation: 1P-1 L, for short. The other learning case is when the same person uses two different languages when speaking to the child. For example, the mother uses both Spanish and English, and the father does the same. The two languages are mixed by each parent. Thus, each person uses two languages: the 1P-2L situation, for short.

The 1P- 1L situation is better

It seems that children are so flexible that they can become fluent in both languages by the age of 3 or 4 years, regardless of the language situation (1P-1L or 1P-2L). Although evidence bearing on this issue is not available, it seems more likely to be the case that the child in the 1P-1 L situation will learn the two languages faster than the child in the 1P-2L situation and attain a higher level of proficiency. This would be due to consistency. In the 1P-1 L situation, the child on hearing speech would not have to puzzle over which of the two sets of language knowledge is being referred to. The child would know that mother will speak one kind of language while father will speak in another. The grammars which are derived from these speech data can be maintained separately right from the start.

People tend to think that the difference in speed of learning between the 1P-1L and 1P-2L situations would be significant. Just how great this difference might be is for empirical research to determine. It might only be a matter of months before the 1P-2L child sorts out the two sets of language data and derives their grammars. Yet it could be a year or more. It would seem that *the more different the languages*, the greater the contrast, and therefore *the easier the sorting task* for the 1P-2L child. It may be that 1P- 2L children produce more mixed language sentences (the view of McLaughlin, 1987), where vocabulary and syntax of the different languages are used in the same sentence, for example, 'Open the *reizoko*' (where *reizoko* is refrigerator in Japanese). Overall, it would seem that the 1P-1L

situation is better since learning may be faster and less mixing might occur.

3. Developmental stages in bilingual language learning

Children learning two first languages simultaneously follow the same route as other children learning their first language (Lyon, 1996). Bilinguals move through the same stages of one-word utterances, two- and three-word utterances, then increasing complexity with morpheme acquisition and complex sentences. In the two- and three-word stages some mixing might occur between the two languages, especially for 1P-2L learners. In the past, theorists postulated that the two different languages were functioning as one language for the child. That is, the child was somehow mixing the vocabulary and syntax of the two languages to form one language system. However, the current view is that the child is simply switching between the two languages in the way that adult language learners do. An adult or a child who cannot think of a word in one language might then use a word or phrase while speaking the second language. This is called 'code switching'. Simultaneous bilingual children, it seems, tend not to do this as much.

As with first-language learning, when the child often incorrectly extends the meaning of a word to include too many objects, the bilingual child may also overgeneralize in one or both of the languages. Or the child may have yet to learn the word in one language and as a result uses the word of the other language (the 'something is better than nothing' principle). Thus, sometimes the mixing of words from two different languages may not be the result of the child having difficulty in distinguishing between the two languages. Rather it can be the result of the child using *every* linguistic tool at his or her command in order to communicate.

D. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the discussion above, it is advisable for parents (or potential parents) who have bilingual abilities and have decided to raise their children in a bilingual situation to use the language in the 1P-1L fashion right from the start. It is inadvisable to wait until the child is 1 or 2 years of age before introducing the second language. If parents wait, they may not be able to carry out their plan. For, in the course of a year or two, their use of one language will

become so set that they will experience great psychological difficulty in changing to another. When a social relationship has been established with the child by means of one language right from birth, it will not be easy for the parent to switch to a different language. The child will find it strange, too, and may offer some resistance initially.

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