

An essay on varying cases of language acquisition and bilingualism

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Google defines language as, “ the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way,” and, “ a system of communication used by a particular country or community.” Thus, by reviewing the two given definitions one can conclude that human life is critically incomplete if devoid of this system of communication termed as language. In a general implication the topic demands an insightful comparison of two separate cases of language acquisition or learning. Before moving onto a general anatomy of the two cases, it is essential to know that an individual’s first language, also referred to as one’s native language, mother tongue or in linguistics as L1, is the language or languages a person acquires from birth or within the critical period (an unspecified hypothetical time frame, ending at the inception of puberty, after which language acquisition becomes too difficult).

Hence, a person is prone to speak their first language fluently. On the other hand, an individual’s second language or L2 is the language they learn after having already acquired a first language from birth. Thenceforth, the first case put forth is of a child faced with the challenge and opportunity of becoming bilingual (being fluent in two languages) from birth. A common example available to conceive this case is of the child having parents who both possess different mother tongues which they speak at home. In this case, the child is going to acquire two languages from birth and thereby end up possessing two first languages.

The child’s process of two language acquisition is termed as simultaneous bilingualism, whereby only first language acquisition occurs. On the other hand, the next case is of an adult moving into a country where her/his native

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language is not dominant (used in communication) and therefore the migrant is compelled to learn the language that is dominant in their particular locale. The process of two language acquisition in this individual is termed as sequential bilingualism; when an individual learns two languages one after the other, not at the same time and therefore this individual goes through second language acquisition. Hence, although both individuals will end up learning two languages, the acquisition or learning by both of them will differ from each other and the two cases shall have several similarities and differences whose illustration shall constitute a cogent reply to the topic at hand. Therefore, this essay shall serve its purpose by presenting a substantial and insightful response by explicating the similarities and differences in the processes and outcomes of language learning for the two given types of language learner.

To begin with, the child would feel the need to acquire both languages in order to relay her/his demands to the speaker of each language accordingly. Hence, the child's acquisition of both languages is an instinctive or natural process over which they have no personal power to stop it whilst the adult's acquisition of an L2 is greatly dependent on her/his motivation to learn that language. Such motivation takes either of two forms: integrative or instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is when the individual has a strong desire to immerse into the dominant culture by learning the dominant language because they admire or are attracted to the people that speak the target language. Whereas, instrumental motivation is when the individual acquires the dominant language of the community to attain a practical benefit, such as meeting the qualification requirements for graduation.

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Therefore, the first difference in processes is that the adult and child differ in terms of choice towards the acquisition of the new language(s). The differing outcome of this process is that the adult may choose to leave the new locale to solve the situation while the child can strictly never ignore the languages he/she is exposed to as they cannot leave the social context in which they are being raised. Therefore, the two individuals differ in facing their particular issues. Furthermore, a similarity in the processes would be that both learners will go through a period in which they would not speak the new language(s) but rather understand the implication of each word in the new language(s) by listening only. It is strongly agreed that the Silent Period is an essential early stage in both first and second language acquisition as said by Rod Ellis in his Developmental Sequences.

Hence, the Silent Period will be a common process in both the child and the adult, however, the thinking of the two individuals within the Silent Period differs. While a child will have established two separate communication systems (languages) with respect to the speakers of each language, he/she will stay silent and try to formulate a meaning to each word in both languages and establish a connection of what concept is encapsulated in each word in the case of each language with two separate systems; one for each language. The idea of distinct systems for two languages is supported by the Dual Language System Hypothesis. However, in the case of the adult, the Silent Period is a time frame in which he/she will try to comprehend each word of the target language and relate the word to its translational equivalent in their L1 by means of the word's implication. Hence, the difference within the shared concept of a Silent Period is the cross-linguistic

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interference of an L1 to understand the L2 in the case of the adult while the child comprehends each word in both the languages being learned by the relation which is shared between a concept and its appropriate word in both the languages.

In other words, the adult's thought process would take a word from L2, relate it to its translational equivalent in L1 and the translational equivalent in itself readily possesses a concept attached to it from childhood acquisition.

Meanwhile, the child, in the case of both languages, learns a word and attaches a concept to it. Thenceforth, there is a difference in the thought process within the aforementioned period of understanding the new language(s). The two persons process or organise the language(s) they hear with varying procedures. Even more, it is an established notion that language is perfected once one can speak it fluently, which requires constant practice of speaking and rectification of the errors made. Over here, the child's initial linguistic development in terms of speaking both languages can be elucidated by the lens of George Herbert Mead's sociological theory on the Three Stages of Development (Imitation, Play, and Game).

We will only use the first, " Imitation Stage," to explain the intended point. The name in itself explains that the child, having distinguished that there are two separate languages whilst speaking to the two speakers of the different languages, will unconsciously imitate the speaker without any fear of embarrassment or shame of making mistakes. For example, he/she will imitate the word, " banana," by saying, " nana," and then gradually go on to master the ability to properly speak the word by frequent practice. The two

things to be noted at this point are the feeling of embarrassment upon making mistakes but primarily on how the speech of the two types of learner develops. In the case of the adult learner, we can perceive that they, whilst learning their L2 formally or informally, will not unconsciously speak fragments of words, rather they would start by speaking the target language in terms of full words and learn to construct sentences whilst obeying the syntax of the target language and also follow certain rules (when learning formally) whereas the child is not given knowledge of the technicalities of the languages he/she is acquiring, but simply learns the languages by practicing them towards perfection. When it comes to a fear of embarrassment by making mistakes, the adult is profoundly susceptible to this fear while the child is not due to a strong emotion of self-consciousness in the former.

Although, in formal learning through language classes, the adult will be encouraged to speak, the genuine learning of the target language will occur in naturalistic environments (informal learning) where the aforementioned fear exists in prevalence. The outcome of this process will be that the child will go on to speak both the target languages and learn them to attain the native proficiency while the adult will never attain the native proficiency if they learn their L2 formally (which is a prevalent consequence) due to a lack of access to native speakers in practical situations. Also, an essential difference between the two learners is how the languages they learn or have learned progress with one another. The two hypotheses of the child's simultaneous bilingualism are the Unitary Language System Hypothesis and the Dual Language System Hypothesis. The former states that the two

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languages being acquired commence together as a lexical concoction and then diverge into separate systems by structural differentiation.

The latter proposes the opposite: the child has two distinct systems, one for each language, right from the beginning, which develop parallel to each other. However, the adult's L1 and L2 develop by cross-linguistic interference in which the first language of the adult will influence the learning of the second language. Structures from L1 will be transferred to L2 and this process will either hinder or assist in L2 acquisition. By reflecting the matter through Noam Chomsky's notable Theory of Universal Grammar, we can conclude that the adult, having a prior knowledge of language structure, will get a decent hold on her/his L2 as Chomsky argued that there is a confined set of rules for arranging language. By extension, this implies that all languages share a common structural basis or paradigm.

This set of rules is referred to as universal grammar. Thenceforth, the process between the two learners is different because while the child learns to comprehend and arrange both languages, the adult employs the already known language structures of L1 to learn L2, using universal grammar.

Moving on, an integral dissimilarity in outcomes would be the accents the two learners possess once their language learning is finished. For the child, the muscle plasticity is capitalised to attain two separate native accents in the two target languages and therefore her/his voice box is matured by speech practice to perfection in both the languages. On the other hand, the adult will, most of the time, never attain the native accent. This consequence can be evinced by the end of muscle plasticity by the age of 5 and if the

adult's L2 differs vastly from their L1 in terms of phonology, their matured voice box may never be moulded to produce perfect pronunciations of their L2.

This biological explanation applies to every such individual's inability to speak a second language with a native accent and thereby accounts for the existence of, "foreign accents," of languages. Although this outcome of different accents greatly shows the dichotomy in linguistic development within and after the Critical Period, there are still cases in which the adult language learners end up possessing a native accent albeit them having well crossed the Critical Period. Thus, it is believed that the aforementioned biological restriction isn't strictly binding on every individual and it can be overcome by tremendous levels of integrative motivation as instrumental motivation may not attract the learner to attain the native accent but to merely learn to speak the language. However, the prevalent case is still of the adult ending up speaking the target language with a non-native accent and therefore the two learners will vary in the outcomes of language learning as the child will have a native accent in both the acquired languages, while the adult will have a native accent in their L1 and a foreign accent in their L2 (most probably). Moving on, a corresponding outcome between the two persons will be that both of them will have a dominant language although they acquired or learned the two languages simultaneously (child) or sequentially (adult). In the case of the child, the factors which determine the dominance of either language include the amount of language input (exposure to each language), input stability and the attitudes of parents, who may deem one language as more beneficial and therefore the

paramount language will overwhelm the other in the child's mental lexicon (a mental dictionary of sorts).

Also, if the input of one language exceeds the other, the language to which the child is more exposed to will transcend on to become the dominant language. The last factor is the consistency of input stability. If the child's linguistic environment is changed, meaning if the exposure to a particular language is completely stopped before the final stages of development, for instance, if the parents in the aforementioned example separate, language attrition (the loss of a portion of a learnt language) will occur and the only existing language will emerge as the dominant one. In extreme cases, children may lose the skill to speak the language which has been attenuated, but they will still understand both languages although speak only one (the dominant language). On the other side, the adult may prefer to persist with their native language as the dominant one most of the times but, if they stay in the new country for a long period of time, they are bound to eventually renounce their L1, thereby triggering First Language Attrition and opening the door for language shift, language transfer or assimilation by deeming their L2 as the more valuable language. This is a consequence of many pressures, both internal and external.

Whilst society will speak only the adult's L2, the speaking of L1 will spark a feeling of isolation and when watching the dominant television programs of that country, the feeling of isolation deepens internally and ultimately leads to language shift. In short, both the types of learner will end with a dominant language but the processes which trigger the dominance of a single

language in both cases differ and may result in language attrition, a possible outcome of both cases. Lastly, a similar outcome of language learning for both individuals will be code-switching whilst talking to a person who knows the same two languages they know. They will code-switch (rotate between the two learned languages in one conversation) whenever their mental lexicon or mental dictionary fails to offer a meaning in the language with which the conversation started. Hence, code-switching will indeed be a common outcome for both types of learner.