

Bilingual acquisition in early childhood



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Are bilingual children two monolingual children in one? Discuss.

Research into bilingual acquisition in early childhood has investigated whether infants and toddlers brought up in bilingual settings can be said to have a single language system during the initial stages of language acquisition or whether these early bilinguals develop two separate language systems from the start. If the latter can be shown to be the case, it could be argued that bilingual children are indeed two monolingual children in one. However, there has been considerable debate over the merits of both claims for some period of time. This essay will consider the arguments and some of the evidence put forward in support of both points of view.

Researchers differentiate between two languages acquired from birth (simultaneous bilingual acquisition) and the acquisition of a second language during early childhood. Research, intending to address the question of developing bilingual language systems in the infant, focuses on simultaneous bilingual acquisition. Although as Lanza points out it isn't always easy to decide on "the cut-off point between first language acquisition and early second-language acquisition." [1] The language environment, with both parents speaking both languages or the adoption of a one language one parent approach, is also a consideration. It is often pointed out that bilingual children acquire their languages in much the same way as monolingual children acquire theirs. Pearson and colleagues testing the acquisition of vocabulary found that "differences in average vocabulary size (between the bilingual and monolingual children in their study) across the age range tested were relatively small." [2]

Studies of childhood bilingual development have shown that in almost all cases, children mix elements from the two languages they are acquiring. This has led to claims that in the early stages of acquisition bilingual children have a single language system. Code mixing may involve any aspect of the child's language system i. e., phonetic, lexical, phrasal, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Code mixing is not limited to children. Many researchers have investigated the phenomenon of code mixing or switching in adult bilinguals. However, there are important differences between the two. Adult code switching is rule governed. "What is thought to distinguish bilingual children's mixing from adult mixing is the lack of systematicity or compliance to linguistic rules in the case of children." [3]

The fact that mixing declines with age has been cited as evidence that the child originally had one system that gradually separates into two. The period of mixing is followed by language differentiation sometime during the bilingual child's third year. Volterra and Taeschner's seminal paper interpreting code mixing in terms of a three-stage model of a single language system has had numerous supporters and critics. [4]

A growing number of researchers have published papers in the past couple of decades supporting a two-language system. In 1985 Vihman looked at a bilingual Estonian/ English child. Having pointed out that there was insufficient data concerning the child's comprehension skills in both languages to confirm whether or not he had a single system: "It seems likely that two receptive stores did exist in a rudimentary form even at this earliest stage, however, since comprehension appeared to develop rapidly in both

English and Estonian contexts well before the development of a wide-ranging productive vocabulary.” [5] Considerable research has shown that monolingual children develop comprehension before production skills. The author agreed with Lindholm and Padilla [6] that “ bilingual children are able, from an early age, to differentiate their two systems”. [7]

Genesee also found evidence of “ differentiated underlying language systems” in his study of early bilinguals. He argued that “ bilingual children are able to differentiate their language systems from the beginning and that they are able to

use their developing language systems differentially in contextually sensitive ways.” [8]

Paradis and Genesee concluded the bilingual children in their study developed entirely distinct pronoun system for the two languages. [9] Their research therefore supports the separate language hypothesis. Likewise, Quay’s study of an English/ Spanish bilingual child “ provides no evidence for the two-stage model of lexical development proposed by Volterra and Taeschner.” [10]

Empirical and Interpretative Difficulties

Methodology

Most researchers criticise the methodology used by previous researchers in the field.

Diary studies of a single child are common making any generalisation difficult.

Other factors making comparison and therefore generalisation difficult include: the differing exposure to the languages experienced by each child, their different language backgrounds and history, the different methods of language sampling undertaken by the various researchers, and the fact that to date there is no standardised measurements to compare children at various stages of bilingual development. Furthermore, diary studies may be insufficient to accurately reflect the linguistic competence of the child studied, regardless of whether or not the findings can be shown to be valid for other bilinguals. “ Diary data may not capture all translation equivalents.”

[11] Quay also points out that studies making use of audio and video recordings tend not to make them frequently enough: “ Infrequent recordings for a short duration each time do not allow for conclusive evidence with regard to bilingual children’s ability to produce translation equivalents.” [12]

Radford reviewing Paradis and Genesee (1996) remarks on a methodological shortcoming noted in many other studies, the use of a small corpus of data: “ This might lead us to the conclusion that PG simply didn’t have enough data from enough children to support the sweeping theoretical claims that they make.” [13] Pearson and colleagues also criticize the emphasis on case studies “ a form in which systematic comparisons with other children are not generally attempted.” [14] Their own research compared the language development of 25 English/ Spanish bilinguals with 35 monolinguals: “

Without detailed information from a wide range of children, it is difficult to gain a broad perspective on what is typical and what is exceptional in early bilingual development.” [15]

Radford states, “ much of the evidence VT (Volterra and Taeschner) bring to bear in support of their claim that children start out with a common syntax for their two languages is based to a large extent on code-mixing.” [16] He suggests the fact that bilingual children are known to code mix cannot be seen as evidence for a single language system because adult also code switch and they are “ generally assumed to have separate grammars for each language.” However, as has been stated earlier, children do not code mix in the way adults do. More problematic for supporters of the single language system is the finding by Genesee and colleagues that code mixing in early bilinguals is not as common as Volterra and Taeschner claim. [17] These researchers discovered that code mixing takes place in only 1%-7% of bilingual children’s utterances.

Like Radford, Genesee claims that there are serious methodological and interpretative shortcomings with much research into simultaneous bilingualism. In order for the single system hypothesis to be valid, bilingual children would need to “ use items from both languages indiscriminately in all contexts of communication.” [18] However, as Genesee makes clear, most research in the field has failed to analyse the data by context. Volterra and Taeschner for example, present isolated examples of the child addressing one parent only. [19] Vihman did look at her bilingual child’s utterances in context but she focused on one language only. [20]

If the appearance, then decline, of code mixing in early bilingual development is not necessarily evidence of a single language system, what other factors may be responsible for the phenomenon?

Vihman (1985) argues that the decline in mixing has more to do with the bilingual child gaining in sociolinguistic competence than evidence of the separation of language systems. ^[21] Lanza also suggests a more sociolinguistic explanation for code mixing: “ Children do learn to differentiate their language: however, this differentiation process occurs in language socialisation through which they learn to differentiate ways of speaking according to the social demands of the situation.” ^[22]

Other researchers point out that with the acquisition of more lexical items as the child’s language skills develop, there is less need to borrow between languages (the lexical gap hypothesis). ^[23] ^[24] Peterson claims bilingual children switch to their dominant language because they haven’t the lexicon or syntactic structure in the weaker one. ^[25] Bernardini agrees “ in some young bilingual children...with uneven development, having one language that is clearly weaker than the other, sentence-internal code-mixing is a result of uneven lexical development in the two languages.” ^[26]

Pearson and colleagues test the Volterra & Taeschner (1978) claim “ if children already have a lexical representation for a concept in either language, they will not be motivated to learn or use the word’s translation in the other.” ^[27] This follows Clark’s principle of contrast, which predicts an absence of synonymy in early lexical development in both monolingual and

bilingual children. [28] Pearson and colleagues found no evidence to support Volterra & Taeschner in their study of 27 early bilinguals. Quay also found “no foundation for the principle of contrast in (the) bilingual case (studied).” Quay points out “most studies do not take into account whether young bilinguals have the lexical resources to make a choice between their two languages.” [29]

According to Grosjean one language may be dominant because the child is exposed to that language more frequently and needs it to communicate with more people. [30] Serratrice defined “language dominance in terms of the amount of input the child receives”. [31] It has been pointed out by a number of researchers that mixing may be linked to the child’s speech environment. [32] The bilingual child might code mix because he hears his parents or other adults doing so. It has been argued the “best way to avoid bilingual mixing in children is to have each parent speak only one language to the child.” [33] Quay suggests, “linguistic input from adult interlocutors must be taken into account in discussions of children’s language choices.” [34]

Conclusions

It is clear that many factors are involved in simultaneous bilingual acquisition. The debate over whether these young children develop one or two language systems initially has yet to be satisfactorily resolved. As many researchers point out parental input may well prove to be of particular importance. Whether the child has one system or two and thus resembles a single monolingual child or two monolingual children, it is clear that their “

ability to understand two languages may be comparable in each language to monolingual children's." [35]

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Footnotes

[1] Lanza (1992: 634)

[2] Pearson et al (1993: 112)

[3] Genesee (1989)

[4] Volterra and Taeschner (1978)

[5] Vihman (1985: 316)

[6] Lindholm and Padilla (1978)

[7] Vihman (1985: 317)

[8] Genesee (1989: 174)

[9] Paradis and Genesee (1996).

[10] Quay (1995: 385)

[11] Quay (1995: 382)

[12] Quay (1995: 383)

[13] Radford (2005)

[14] Pearson et al (1993: 95)

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[15] Pearson et al (1995: 348)

[16] Radford (2005)

[17] Genesee et al (1995)

[18] Genesee (1989: 165)

[19] Volterra and Taeschner (1978)

[20] Vihman (1985)

[21] Vihman (1985)

[22] Lanza (1992: 654)

[23] Volterra and Taeschner (1978)

[24] Lindholm and Padilla (1978)

[25] Peterson (1988)

[26] Bernardini and Schlyter (2004: 49)

[27] Pearson et al (1995: 346)

[28] Clark (1987)

[29] Quay (1995: 369)

[30] Grosjean (1982)

[31] Serratrice (2007)

[32] Genesee (1989)

[33] Genesee (1989: 170)

[34] Quay (1995: 383)

[35] Pearson et al (1993: 113)