

Disparities between comprehension and production in the early stages of bilingual lexical development

(From a longitudinal study of a Russian-German bilingual child)

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One of the main issues in the formation of hypotheses concerning early bilingual acquisition is whether bilingual children separate both languages from the very beginning, or whether there is a two-language phase which precedes the acquisition of both languages as separate languages. These two possibilities are known as the one system and the two system theory, respectively.

The hypothesis that each language is acquired separately was popular in the 1980s and 1990s (De Houwer 1990, Genesee 1989). The main argument was that the percentage of one-language expressions used by bilingual children from the very beginning of language acquisition was higher than the percentage of two-language expressions. Most of these claims, however, were based on studies of children who had been raised in an environment where linguistic input was introduced using the one person--one language method. The present study analyses the data of a child who was born into a bilingual environment in which both parents had spoken both languages.

Globally, this latter kind of input is the most common input method, thus it is paradoxical that so little research has focused on this method of input, compared to the one person--one language method.

In this study, the data consisted of approximately 200 video recordings, each about 60 minutes in length, and diary entries spanning the period of time from the birth of the child until the age 5;0 (ongoing). The data was analysed in terms of comprehension and production.

The results confirm the separate development hypothesis only in terms of comprehension. It was shown that from the age of approximately 1;0, the child understood and accepted language equivalents.

An analysis of language production, in contrast, revealed that the child used no language equivalents at all during the one-word phase, i.e. when the child was relating events, the active lexicon consisted of one word —either Russian or German. In our opinion, the decision to adopt a particular Russian or German equivalent into the active lexicon (if both equivalents had been present in the input) depended on which word the child found easier to pronounce, e.g. during this phase, the child said ‘yes’ in Russian and ‘no’ in German. Towards the end of this phase, the child began to “translate”, i.e. when the child was asked to repeat a certain word which was not in the active lexicon, the word was “repeated” without hesitation, using the equivalent from the other language.

Upon entering the two-word phase, the child began to use both language equivalents. Although the percentage of two-language phrases e.g. *heiss* (German ‘hot’) *čaj* (Russian ‘tea’) [2;5.19] was high at the beginning of this phase, the percentage continuously decreased and by the end of the phase, only very few two-language phrases were used, having been exchanged for one-language expressions. Another observation about this phase was that the child often combined Russian verb stems with German infinitive endings e.g. *plak-en* [2;5.6] from *plak-* (Russian ‘to cry’) and *-en* (the German infinitive ending). Also, towards the end of this phase, the child often used both language equivalents together in ‘important’ conversations with the parents, e.g. *nein* (German ‘no’), *net* (Russian ‘no’) or *pit’* (Russian ‘to drink’), *trinken* (German ‘to drink’) [2;7.26].

During the transition to three and four-word expressions, the child had a tendency to conform to the language environment, i.e. during conversations with monolingual German speakers, every possible German equivalent was used, and with monolingual Russian speakers, every possible Russian equivalent. Here, occasional self-corrections were observed. After a three-week stay in Russia, the child used German infinitives with an added Russian infinitive ending e.g. *laufen-t’* ‘to run’, *essen-t’* ‘to eat’ [2;8.27].

From the age of about three, the child could better distinguish between the two languages and tried consciously to avoid mixing them. The number of instances of self-correction increased.

At the present age of the child 5;0, the child employs almost no lexical borrowings and there are few interferences in language production.

To summarize, this study found that the bilingual child treated language equivalents across the two languages as synonyms of the same language from the beginning of language acquisition. The child knew that these equivalents existed, however, as far as active language production was concerned, the principle of symmetry was followed: an event-- a description. With time and through experience with monolingual individuals, the child learned that there are two systems which must be kept separate. In the next phase, the instances of lexical borrowings became more and more seldom, with an occasional grammatical material interference in both

directions (see above examples). Not until this phase did the child learn to separate the two languages, in terms of the lexicon and the grammar. Some findings from this study matched the three-phase model (Volterra/Taeschner 1978).

References

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