

PSYCHOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF BILINGUALISM IN CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This paper will consider psycholinguistic aspects of bilingualism from two perspectives: the psychology of the individual and social psychology. After a description of the linguistic development of bilingual children, we present research comparing bilingual and monolingual children with respect to cognitive development. Following that, we will discuss the emotional importance of speaking the parents' language and the reasons for bilingual children's relatively high rates of school failure. The role of attitude and motivation in language maintenance and loss, as well as in the acquisition of a second language, will be discussed in the context of social identity theory. The paper will conclude with suggestions for recommendations.

Keywords: bilingual, monolingual, children, language learning, interference, acquisitions, challenge, research, theory.

Introduction

The term “bilingualism” originates from the Latin words *bi* meaning “two” and *lingua* meaning “language.” In general, bilingualism refers to the ability of an individual to learn, understand, and use two languages. It is closely connected with the cognitive and communicative processes involved in language acquisition and language use. A bilingual person can effectively communicate and switch between two linguistic systems depending on the communicative situation.

Bilingualism may develop in different ways. Some individuals acquire two languages naturally during childhood, while others learn a second language later in life through formal education or social interaction. In modern society, bilingualism has become a widespread phenomenon due to globalization, migration, and intercultural communication.

In linguistic literature devoted to language contact and language relations, there is still no universally accepted definition of the terms “bilingualism” and “multilingualism.” According to Bagirokov, various interpretations of these concepts can be found in linguistic studies [4, 104, 1999]. Different terms are also used to describe individuals who speak or acquire a second language. These differences are mainly connected with various approaches to the process of second language acquisition.

A bilingual individual is generally understood as a person who is able to use two or more languages. Therefore, not only individuals but also entire societies, such as the populations of India and Switzerland, may be considered bilingual or multilingual communities.

Some researchers argue that bilingualism occurs when a speaker alternates between two language codes in a particular communicative situation. This may involve national languages, literary languages, dialects, or interethnic languages.

The concept of bilingualism also implies the coexistence of two linguistic systems within the human mind, where interaction occurs not only between languages but also between cultures. In some cases, second language learners achieve such a high level of proficiency that they become almost indistinguishable from native speakers of that language.



Methods

This study examines the psycholinguistic aspects of bilingualism, particularly focusing on the linguistic development of bilingual children and the phenomenon of language interference. Previous studies have shown that bilingual children may experience certain delays in grammatical development when compared to monolingual children. For example, Swain (1972) conducted a case study on question formation in two French-English bilingual children. The children were raised according to the “one parent–one language” principle and were observed at the ages of 3;2–3;9 and 4;0–4;5. The findings suggested that the development of wh-questions in bilingual children may be delayed by several months compared to monolingual children.

Similarly, Padilla and Liebman (1975) compared the linguistic development of three Spanish-English bilingual children with that of monolingual children using Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) as a measurement tool. Their results were compared with Brown’s (1973) data and showed similar patterns of language development. In early language acquisition, MLU is commonly used as an indicator of structural and grammatical development.

Another important aspect of bilingualism is language mixing and interference. Parents and educators are often concerned when children mix elements from two languages within words, phrases, or sentences. Code-switching and language mixing are frequently interpreted as signs that bilingual children are cognitively overloaded by the simultaneous acquisition of two languages. However, many researchers consider such phenomena to be a natural stage of bilingual language development.

Studies show that phonological interference is relatively rare in bilingual children (Leopold, 1947; Raffler-Engel, 1956; Taeschner, 1983). Variations in pronunciation are generally similar to those observed in monolingual children. Morphological interference has also been found to occur infrequently (Burling, 1959; Foster-Meloni, 1978; Taeschner, 1983). According to Taeschner (1983), such interferences mainly serve to adapt lexical items to the grammatical system of the language being used.

Semantic interference refers to the extension of a semantic concept from one language to another language where the meaning is similar but not identical. This type of interference is more common in closely related languages. Taeschner (1983), however, found semantic interference to be relatively uncommon among bilingual Italian-German children.

Syntactic interference is considered one of the most frequent forms of interference after lexical interference. Taeschner (1983) argued that bilingual children often preserve the sentence structure of one language while replacing lexical items with words from another language. Another explanation is that children are still in the process of separating the two syntactic systems. Volterra and Taeschner (1978) suggested that syntactic separation develops only after lexical separation has been achieved.

Results

The results of various studies indicate that the level of language interference in bilingual children ranges from 2–3% (Lindholm and Padilla, 1977) to approximately 30% (Taeschner, 1983), depending on the child’s age and the specific type of interference being observed. In general, language mixing and interference are often perceived as occurring more frequently than they actually do.

Several researchers have found that the process of separating two languages largely depends on the consistency of language use within the child’s immediate environment. When parents frequently mix languages, children may experience delays in distinguishing between the two linguistic systems (Burling, 1959; Doyle et al., 1977; McLaughlin, 1978; Fritsche, 1982, 1985;



Goodz, 1987). Temporary interference may also occur when one language is used in situations that are usually associated with another language (Taeschner, 1983; Pedersen, 1987).

The issue of language interference and separation is both linguistic and sociolinguistic in nature. Studies show that bilingual children who regularly use mixed linguistic codes are nevertheless capable of separating their languages when communicating with monolingual speakers. However, they tend to continue mixing languages when interacting with other bilingual speakers (Bergman, 1976; Fantini, 1978, 1985).

Psycholinguists and neurolinguists use the term code-switching to describe the process in which bilingual speakers involuntarily shift from one language to another depending on the communicative situation. F. Grosjean used this term specifically to explain bilingual language behavior. Garcia proposed two approaches to explaining the interaction between the languages of bilingual individuals. The first approach suggests that bilinguals possess two separate language systems in their minds, while the second argues that bilingual individuals develop one integrated linguistic system. In both cases, researchers are mainly interested in the dynamic mental processes involved in bilingual language use.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, it can be concluded that bilingualism should not be defined only by the ability to speak two languages fluently. A more important criterion is the ability to think directly in another language without translating from the native language. In other words, true bilingualism involves the capacity to produce sentences and express thoughts naturally within each linguistic system.

Discussion

Although many theories initially opposed bilingualism, one of the most influential was Macnamara's (1966) "balance hypothesis." According to Appel and Muysken (1987:104), this theory suggested that human beings possess a limited neural and physiological capacity for language learning. Therefore, increased proficiency in one language was believed to reduce the possibility of achieving equal proficiency in another language.

In other words, the theory claimed that learning a second language could negatively affect the development of the first language. However, this viewpoint was later criticized and rejected by many scholars who argued that bilingualism provides cognitive, linguistic, and academic advantages rather than disadvantages.

In response to such theories, researchers proposed more balanced and evidence-based approaches to bilingualism. One of the most influential scholars in this field, James Cummins (1979), emphasized the educational and cognitive benefits of bilingualism. He argued that children who are exposed to both their native language (L1) and a second language (L2) through a bilingual educational environment are more likely to achieve high levels of functional bilingualism and academic success.

Cummins also pointed out that children from minority-language backgrounds may experience difficulties not because of bilingualism itself, but because of insufficient support for both languages in the educational system. According to his theory, successful bilingual development depends largely on social, educational, and environmental factors.

The discussion of bilingualism has therefore shifted from viewing bilingualism as a cognitive burden to recognizing it as a valuable linguistic and social resource. Modern psycholinguistic research supports the idea that bilingual individuals are capable of effectively managing two linguistic systems and may even develop enhanced cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and communicative competence.

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