BILINGUAL ACQUISITION:
THE NEED FOR A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE
Part II[1]

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Language Differentiation and Bilinguality

Most children never think about their own ability to speak. The first time they hear someone speak a different language, it is often a surprising, if not disconcerting, experience. On the other hand, a child exposed to two or more languages is probably more sophisticated in this respect. He has observed people speak and behave in different ways, and he himself is capable of doing the same. In acquiring this ability, the bilingual child was faced with the task of differentiating linguistic inputs in his environment. We are concerned, then, with the child's recognition of a specific language system and the ability to differentiate one from another. These are prerequisites for an awareness of his own bilinguality. Although it cannot be stated with precision when Mario first noted that people with whom he had contact behaved in linguistically different ways, some indications were provided through his questions, his reactions to what he heard, and his own behavior.

Developmental studies have shown that the infant begins to interact with his environment almost at once, to distinguish the familiar from the unfamiliar, the known from the unknown, and the same from different (Lidz, 1968). Similarly, when Mario was only a few months old, he showed that he distinguished his parents from other people by crying when others picked him up. This discriminating ability occurs auditiorially as well as visually.

Numerous entries in the child's diary illustrate his early recognition and differentiation of sounds. As early as 0;4 he already showed signs of recognizing his parents' voices and responding differently to different intonations produced sounds which, although meaningless in themselves, reflected a recognizable intonational pattern. Between 1;8 and 1;10 several incidents occurred which demonstrated his incipient ability to discriminate languages based on acoustic impressions alone. Ten months later, this familiarity and discrimination of specific phones already began to affect Mario's interaction with other people as he began to distinguish people by the sounds they made, so that language differences had already become a factor which affected his

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relations with others. (Burling reports similar reactions on the part of son, in Bar-Adon and Leopold, 1971.)

Throughout observation, it became apparent that the child's ability to differentiate languages was affected by the way in which the two languages were used. That is, Mario's environment demanded separateness and consequently differentiation was encouraged and enforced. When English first appeared, however, Mario began to mix both languages within the same utterance. Mixing continued for approximately two months, between 2;7 and 2;8. But complete separation of languages was already observed by 2;9. From that point on, all entries in the speech diary show that Mario had clearly sorted the two languages and used each separately and appropriately.

In summary, it appeared that language differentiation was part of an on-going process which began in the pre-speech period. Language sounds were only some of the many types of stimuli which surrounded the infant. The infant learned to differentiate those sounds which had meaning from those which did not. However, speech sounds were not used indiscriminately, but they occurred in sets, each belonging to a different language. The use of each set in separate circumstances assisted the child in relating each language to its appropriate context. The more separate the environments in which each language was used, the more rapidly and the more easily the child learned to differentiate linguistic systems. Sufficient exposure to a set of alternates, and the need, enabled Mario to acquire productive skill in two languages. Since he was also in contact with other languages on occasions, he also learned that people communicate in a variety of ways. Mario was well aware that things were called in one of several possible ways, that the same fairy tale or bed-time story could be retold in another language -he was capable of doing this himself- and he knew that thoughts were translatable . Furthermore he knew how to use language to find out more about language, by asking: "Cómo se dice," and "Qué significa?" He was aware of a variety of other codes he had heard, not only of Spanish, English, and Italian, but also of Aymara, French, and Japanese. He knew that a code could be varied so as to make it sound funny or to render its message less transparent, such as in Pig Spanish; he knew too that communication was also conducted through writing or oral spelling. He was conscious of, and commented on his own bilinguality and the bilinguality of others. He was able to label some languages, suggesting that he mastered the abstract concept of language, since labeling required the ability to identify sets of related linguistic features and an awareness of the open nature of language.

Language Choice and the Social Variables

To be able to perform bilingually requires not only the use of at least two languages, but also an awareness of the basic social conditions which call for the use of one code or the other. Mario had begun active use of Spanish at 1;4. By the onset of his second tongue at age 2;6, he was immediately faced with the task of sorting appropriate linguistic sets for each situation. A brief period ensued during which a sorting of lexical items was apparent. Sorting

was assisted by both linguistic considerations (like the phonological shape of words) and social considerations (like the persons and contexts with which words were associated). Nonetheless, sorting was rapid, so that code switching commenced within only a few days after the introduction of English words into Mario's speech.

The first social variable which affected language choice was the interlocutor engaged in speech with Mario. Given the child's limited environment, the right language was determined almost entirely in accordance with the person speaking to the child. However, as the child's language developed and, also as his world enlarged, other social factors influenced language choice. The next major factor was the setting of the speech event. Initially there were two clear-cut divisions, the home and the world outside the home. The original, simplistic, framework affecting choice was revised. Subsequent revisions were made by the child as additional social variables affected his life.

Mario began early to differentiate and categorize people based on their physical appearance. This assisted him in anticipating the proper code to use with people, particularly those unknown to him. Characteristics of place were another determinant of language choice, for example, whether the event occurred in a predominantly English-speaking milieu (such as Vermont) or in a Spanish-speaking milieu (such as Mexico or Bolivia). Because there was a high degree of consistency in the patterns of language behavior which were displayed in a given situation, it is possible to construct a framework which reflects the interrelationship between the social variables and language choice. The accuracy of this framework is supported by the fact that Mario normally reacted in some demonstrable way when the language used in a given situation was other than what he expected as "normal" for the circumstances. The following anecdote illustrates the child's linguistic expectations:

> At age 4;9, a friend whom Mario had originally met in Mexico using Spanish visited the home. The visitor, although Greek, "looked" Latin. The mother's conversation with him was conducted in English rather than Spanish. As Mario entered the room he was surprised by what he witnessed and eventually interrupted with a puzzled question to his mother sottovoce:
>
> Mario to Mother: ¿Por qué hablas así, mamá?
>
> No hables así; no blaka bla.
>
> Así como yo estoy hablando ahola. (ahora).

The framework governing language choice, however, holds true only when the child is engaged in normal dialog. When the child attempts to produce special effects upon his listeners (for example, to amuse, surprise, or shock) or when the act assumed some special form (for example, role play, singing, play language, or quoting), then the language choice might often be the opposite of the normal choice. Hence, form and function of the speech act also

became factors in affecting language choice.

Code switching began at 2;6. By 2;8 it was fairly well established and well executed. The child by 5.8 was capable of making appropriate language choices: he switched codes consciously, rapidly, and naturally. He behaved like a normal five-year-old- in either of the two languages, with the appropriate people, and in the right time and place.

Usage and Styles

In a sense, we have already discussed two of Mario's styles of speech, Spanish and English, in that some consider any modification of sets of linguistic items a style, even to the extent of code switching. Other sociolinguists, however, consider full code switching separately from style variations within the same language. Whether bilingual behavior is considered a code shift or a variation, it is perhaps the most dramatic evidence that the child is indeed capable of controlling varying sets of linguistic features in a fixed relation to observable social factors even at a very young age. If the child can acquire two full codes, there should be no doubt that he can also acquire other styles as well. This, in fact, is what Mario did, beginning in infancy.

As an infant, Mario used differentiated vocalizations to express varying physical needs e.g., hunger, distress, pain), and later as self-expression. Ostwald and Peltzman (1974) investigated differentiated cries in infants and made similar observations. As the child became a social being, his language was continually shaped by social patterns, and he learned to use differentiated language styles to reflect social needs. Proper or aberrant verbal behavior was determined by the social factors present at the moment of speech, each set of circumstances requiring differing "styles." Whether the child was speaking with younger children, peers, or adults; whether his interlocutors were well known to him, casual associates, or socially distant; whether they were socially superior, inferior, or equal; or whether they were in a formal or informal setting were all factors affecting the child's style and use of language. Styles were often judged as appropriate or not for a given situation, just as in the choice of language.

For example, the language Mario used with peers was characterized in distinctive ways, setting it apart from the speech style used with adults. Peer talk contained a high incidence of direct commands, many expressive interjections, frequent onomatopoeic sounds, an almost complete absence of courtesy terms and diminutives, imitated utterances, and an occasional interspersing of songs, recitations, and the like. This was certainly not at all like the verbal behavior he displayed with older people, nor would it have been tolerated. Negative feedback was provided when the child did not comply to the appropriate use of style for each circumstance, and tolerance decreased as the child matured.

There was also evidence that the child perceived various social norms even before he displayed his knowledge by conforming through his own behavior. For example, one of the most important social markers used in adult speech style in Spanish - as in most Romance tongues - is the distinction connoted between the selection of the pronouns "tú/usted," and their corresponding verb endings. To use this distinction, however, requires the mastery of a considerable amount of morphological detail. This is possibly the reason that children normally use only one of the two forms, generally "tú," with all interlocutors, making no allowances for age, role, or social distance. Adults show considerable tolerance when addressed in this way by children, whereas the same would not be true if another adult made an incorrect choice.

Even when Mario was nearly six, he did not use the "tú/usted" distinction in his own speech: "tú" was the sole form. Nonetheless there were occasional clues that he may have grasped part of the rather complex social rule which underlies this linguistic distinction. At 5;5, while roleplaying in La Paz with his parents and grandparents, he assumed the role of teacher and assigned the others to be pupils. He adopted a rather straight posture, crossed his arms, and with a serious face directed his class. The task he assigned was to translate utterances he gave in English. When his playful students laughed, he called the class back to order and, directing his comments to his grandmother (now in the role of a little girl), he said:

Mario to Grandmother:	Niña, ven acá. ¡Siéntese!
Grandmother:	(Smiles and laughs silently)
Mario to Grandmother:	¡Cállese usted, niña!

Although he was linguistically inconsistent in the first phrase in which "tú" was implicit in the choice of the verb "ven," he did use correct forms of "usted" in the two subsequent verbs said in the command form. His own spontaneous use of "usted" was so correct both in linguistic form and in application in this imaginary social situation, that it seemed clear that Mario knew a great deal more about the underlying rules for the "tú/usted" distinction than he had previously displayed. His role as a young child simply had not required him to use this distinction thus far. Of course Mario had never attended school in a Spanish-speaking country and consequently could not possibly have imitated these forms from direct experience. Hence, their use here probably reflected his perception of the rule which required that "usted" be used in a formal situation such as a classroom wherein a teacher addresses pupils.

Although linguists generally agree that children acquire most of their native language by age five, the literature does not generally comment on their ability to differentiate styles. Gleason, in a paper presented in 1971, appears to be one of the few to have focused on speech styles in children. Her study, however considered children between the ages of four and eight. Nonetheless, she also made a few incidental observations concerning styles of children under four, acknowledging that "... even the tiniest children make some distinctions." (Gleason, 1971)

A bilingual child, in particular, presents a most dramatic display of this phenomenon through his ability to shift entire codes. It is also clear throughout Mario's speech data that he is capable of modifying speech signals in various ways in relationship to context. Speech styles, then, are characteristic not only of adults, but of children too. Rare opportunities such as roleplay, the child's reaction to adults when they transgress social rules, and sometimes through the child's own comments, provide clues as to the child's perception of styles, even when these are not evident in his own speech. Too often it is assumed that the child does not possess abilities he does not display. Yet when the proper circumstances are present he may demonstrate an awareness of styles which do not normally affect him in his role as a child.

Styles may come and go, since they are contingent on the differing roles and relationships the child establishes with his developing world. As he advances from home to school, work, college, business, and to differing life styles, so also does his language evolve in vocabulary and style to meet these new needs. What began in infancy is a process which continues throughout the child's life on into adulthood.

Linguistic Interference

Interference is common to the speech of the bilingual speaker, arising from the individual's knowledge of two or more languages. Like other aspects of the speaker's language (both in its linguistic construct as well as in its use) interference in speech is subject to influence from the setting of the speech event. However, in most cases interference has only been investigated as a linguistic phenomenon without due regard to the impact of the socio-cultural setting of language contact. Weinreich (1968), for one, acknowledges the influence of "non-structural" factors when he states:

> The forms of mutual interference of languages that are in contact are stated in terms of descriptive linguistics. ...(however) The precise effect of bilingualism on a person's speech varies with a great many other factors, some of which might be called extra-linguistic because they lie beyond the structural differences of the languages...

Nevertheless, most studies of interference have been linguistic in nature, dealing with potential interference, which might arise out of the inherent similarities or differences in structure. A common treatment of potential linguistic interference is in the form of contrastive analysis. However, a contrastive analysis is generally a theoretical approach to the problem which cannot accurately reflect the variable nature of interference as it actually occurs in the speech of a bilingual.

Furthermore, a consideration of interference often implies a synchronic description of the phenomenon, ignoring language shift, which Weinreich (1968) has described as "....the change from the habitual use of one

language to that of another." Although separate synchronic analyses done at different stages in time help to determine the direction of shift, one is immediately propelled into a sociolinguistic treatment, since usage forms part of the consideration. Also, most linguistic treatments of interference have studied adult bilinguals who, although they may undergo linguistic shifts themselves over a period of time, are usually viewed in terms of interference at a given point in time. Shifting in language use is more dramatically witnessed in children in whom the acquisition or dissolution of a second tongue often occurs within a short period of time. Because of this, one can easily observe the onset of a second language, shifts in language use, and often the disappearance of one or several languages often within a matter of months. Since interference is such a fluid phenomenon, subject to increase and shift in direction, it appears that it must be viewed in terms of process- and a sociolinguistic one at that- rather than simply as a synchronic linguistic state.

A second important consideration must also be taken into account. That is, since the child, especially before six, is still in the process of language development, he uses a language which cannot be judged by adult grammar. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that the child's language at each point possesses its own internal coherence (Slobin et al, 1967). Certain linguistic features are learned later than others. If we are to consider interference in the bilingual child, then we are faced with the extraordinarily difficult task of deciding which deviations are caused by interference and which are merely deviations from standard language.

In Mario's speech diary there is surprisingly little evidence of interference within the realm of grammar, in spite of a potentially great degree predicted by contrastive analyses of the two language systems. Four types of interference were noted: (1) the transfer of morphemes, (2) the transfer of grammatical relations, (3) word positioning, and (4) integration of loanwords; two other types of grammatical interference identified by Weinreich (1968) did not occur at all (i.e., a change in function of "indigenous" morpheme or category, and "abandonment of obligatory categories.") Interference in Spanish was almost non-existent, and interference in English was slight. The direction of grammatical interference was at variance with that of phonological and lexical interference. In phonology it was noted that Mario experienced greater interference from Spanish into English; in the lexical area it was noted that he experienced greater interference from English into Spanish. Hence the direction at each level was not necessarily the same. It appeared, however, that lexical borrowing was most conspicuous and occurred possibly at a more conscious level than borrowing of phonological or syntactic features. If this is the case, it would also stand to reason that the lexicon was also more susceptible to influence from external social factors than were the other two areas.

Whatever the case, it appears that a contrastive analysis serves only as a theoretical index to potential influence which one language system may have on another by comparing their points of similarities and differences. However,

social factors determine to a large extent what interference will occur in fact. Indeed, it is easy for bilinguals to fall into the habit of mixing languages, particularly when speaking with other bilingual persons who know the same two systems. Yet it is also apparent from the speech diary that social factors do exert sufficient influence so as to be able to counteract potential linguistic interference at most levels. One can only see these forces in operation by considering language use as well as the linguistic elements per se. In Mario's case, it was quite clear that socialization, plus the prevailing attitudes of his caretakers, were sufficiently strong forces which kept to a minimum an otherwise potentially great degree of linguistic interference.

Some Final Observations

In conclusion, the process of dual acquisition was not observably different from that involved in the acquisition of only one language. It is true that Mario acquired more phonemes, more lexicon, and more syntactic rules than would have been required for only one language. However, the process remained inherently the same. In a similar way, Mario was exposed to at least two cultural patterns.

What differed was language use. Mario had to learn the signals in his environment which triggered the use of one or another of his two languages. In a similar fashion he learned to recognize the social factors which required corresponding style modifications. When styles are viewed in this way, it becomes obvious that all speakers learn to use linguistic alternatives in relation to differing contexts. Hence, the process of learning the rules of co-occurrence or co-variation between linguistic elements and social factors remains inherently the same, whether for the bilingual or the monolingual speaker.

Language is the child's passport for entry into a social group, or a cultural community. Two languages permit the child to enter into and acquire the world views of two communities. The desirability of two world views appears to be primarily a question of one's attitude and values. However, for these views to exist in harmony, rather than in conflict, favorable attitudes on the part of those who surround the child are essential to permit him to grow up a well-adjusted individual, comfortable in either community. Unfavorable attitudes in either social group in which the child participates may produce conflict or force him to choose one type of verbal bahavior to the exclusion of the other. Thus far, Mario has been fortunate in having had positive experiences in each of the communities in which he has participated.

It seems possible that an individual, exposed to two languages and two world views from early childhood, may emerge a double beneficiary.. Furthermore, dual membership impresses upon the individual the variety of possible behaviors of man. In any case, no matter what language or languages are spoken by an individual, his use of language reflects much information about his roles, his relationships to others, and his views of the worlds. Yet language is part of his system of communication and interaction, and therefore it cannot be

studied in isolation. Language behavior- especially that of the bilingual individual - must be contemplated within the fuller context of a social perspective.

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