The Bilingual Family
A handbook for parents
Second Edition

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CHAPTER ONE

Children and language

What do children use language for?
In this section, we will be looking at the various stages that all children go through when they start talking. However, it is important to remember that we cannot see what is actually going on inside a child’s head, so that despite the intense scrutiny that has been made in recent years of the ways in which children acquire language, much of the mystery remains. This is one reason why we will concentrate on what children actually do with language, since that can be observed and studied by an outsider. A second reason is that it is of far greater relevance to their relationships with their parents than most technical studies, which tend to deal with such topics as the order in which certain fine points of grammar are acquired, or the connection between language and the physiology of the brain. For example, it is possible to analyse in great detail how a child gradually acquires the complex grammar of negation, but when Eliot (2 yrs 1 mth) says ‘No Teletubbies!’ his mother needs to know whether he wants her to change TV channels or not.

1.1 Building up relationships

- Morning.
- Morning.
- Bit nippy, isn’t it?
- Yes. Really nippy.
- Oh well.
- Yes, well. See you.
- See you.
We spend much of our lives building up and maintaining social relationships by means of rituals of this kind. If we look at the actual content of such exchanges, at what is actually said, we find that they are almost totally bereft of meaning. But if we look at their functions, at what is done, we see that they are of very great importance: quite literally, they hold society together.

Try to imagine what would happen if next time you met your neighbour in the lift and he said: ‘Hello’, you did not answer. Not to return a greeting is to shun someone’s society, almost to deny their existence, which is why we get so upset if it ever happens to us.

Moreover, in most circumstances, no other serious conversation can take place until these rituals have been observed. It is extremely rare for us to ‘go straight to the point’: even as we are saying that that is our intention, we are usually acknowledging that what has happened up to that moment was not the point.

Babies learn the first rudiments of social interaction a long time before they can actually utter anything that sounds like language. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that this process starts at birth, since parents use the baby’s various movements and noises to simulate the give-and-take of interactive conversation. C. E. Snow (1977) in an article on the development of conversation between mothers and babies quotes the following example of ‘turn-taking’ between a mother and her infant.

**mother:** Hello. Give me a smile then. (gently pokes infant in the ribs)
**infant:** (yawns)
**mother:** Sleepy are you? You woke up too early today.
**infant:** (opens fist)
**mother:** (touching infant’s hand) What are you looking at? Can you see something?
**infant:** (grasps mother’s finger)
**mother:** Oh, that’s what you wanted. In a friendly mood, then. Come on, give us a smile.

From the ages of three or four months, babies will respond to parental smiles and will also ‘greet’ their parents in this way in order to initiate interaction. Whole ‘conversations’ thus take place with a succession of actions and reactions, gurgles, cries, smiles and the like, teaching the child to take his turn in conversations. This behaviour is so fundamental to human communication that we rarely think of it as something we had to learn.

In the months preceding the time when they start producing words that
can be recognised as such by their parents, babies produce a great variety of sounds, including many that do not exist in their parents’ language or languages. This is perfectly normal and is, indeed, an absolutely essential phase in children’s development. They are learning to control and use their vocal apparatus, and trying out all the different articulatory possibilities it allows, but not yet associating any of the noises so produced with particular meanings. Gradually, the range and number of sounds diminishes, largely because the parents’ reactions favour and encourage some (that is, the sounds of their languages) rather than others, in a sort of whittling down process.

One of the main ways in which parents help children with this process of discovery and selection is by associating certain sounds with certain routines. The child who smiles back, plays ‘boo’, says ‘Mummy and Daddy’, ‘thank you’ and ‘bye-bye’ is learning the essentials of social routines – greeting, recognising, identifying, thanking, leave-taking and so on – which he will use throughout the rest of his life. V. Cook (1979) comments:

My daughter Nicola . . . used to make a sort of ‘eeyore’ noise whenever she handed something to someone. It was some time before we realised that she was trying to say ‘Here you are’. She had learnt that ‘Here you are’ is part of the routine for handing people things, even if her parents were hardly aware that this was so.

Similar routines are used by babies to attract their parents’ attention, to get what they want, in other words, to serve all their social needs, even though they may be able to use only one ‘word’ at a time and even though these words might be far from sounding like ‘proper’ words.

1.2 Exchanging information

Babies very soon want to ‘show and tell’. In fact, they usually start producing their ‘first words’ to name the people around them and the things which are important to them: Mummy, Daddy, bottle, biscuit, dog, and so on. They also name ‘actions’ and the results of actions, as when they say ‘gone’ after their mother has left the room or when their bottle or bowl is empty.

When a child uses only one-word utterances of this kind, it is very difficult to know exactly what he means or what he is trying to do. This means that parents are constantly guessing, repeating or elaborating on what they think baby is saying, and this is, in turn, the richest possible ‘input’
for the child, who uses it as raw material to develop his own language and intellect.

This exchange of information is not one-sided, though. Babies do more than just ‘name’ things mechanically for the sake of putting a label on them. They are also, it seems reasonable to guess, expressing interest in certain things they have noticed: after all, there are lots of things they do not name. They are, then, making critical comments on the world around them.

1.3 Thinking

The ‘mistakes’ children make when they start naming objects at this one-word stage reveal that they are beginning to make sense of the world around them. This is particularly obvious when the child uses one word to refer to two objects which have something in common, but which are usually given different names. When a child uses ‘Daddy’ for all male human beings, or ‘doggy’ for all four-legged animals, he is revealing that he has already classified animate beings along a number of dimensions which may not yet be the right ones, but which are none the less meaningful: ‘doggies’ are not to be confused with ‘daddies’. It should not worry parents to find small children making even bigger ‘mistakes’ than this: they are just testing and learning the system. An eight-month-old girl notices a brass ornament and stretches out to touch it. Her parents recognise what it is she’s after, and she learns the Swedish word for ‘horse’ häst. But the child’s häst does not yet mean ‘horse’, as we see when she uses it first to indicate another object in which she is interested, next as a general attention-getter, then as something like ‘pretty’, before even beginning to put it into the ‘animals’ pigeon-hole.

A child learning a language is learning about the world, about how it is organised and how it works. This is very different, if only in degree, from the adult learning a second language, who tends to work the other way round: he brings his world with him and uses the language to try to express it. Moreover, as a result of their cognitive development, adults can use language in ways which are not available to young children; they are able to make conscious use of cognitive skills, for instance to solve complex problems or to plan a series of actions.

One of the greatest advantages of bilingualism is that even very small children realise that the relationship between words and the objects they refer to is not a necessary one, that the same things can have different
names. It does seem that this early exercise in abstraction does give the bilingual the mental flexibility and openness which has frequently been reported by experimenters and psychologists. This flexibility in turn is one of the main protections against what monolinguals often imagine must be an unpleasant experience – thinking in two languages. Quite literally, the bilingual does not mind this. There are a number of reasons why this is so: first, there are thought processes that are non-verbal or pre-verbal anyway. Secondly, verbal thought – our ‘interior monologue’ – is usually conscious and the bilingual will choose which language to think in. Thirdly, many bilinguals are in the habit of always thinking in one language except when they are actually using another (our guess is that this is the majority). Fourthly, many bilinguals actually like being able to think in two languages, often using it as a creative approach to problem-solving, a sort of lateral thinking.

Unfortunately, this is one of those cases where ‘if you have to ask the question, you may not understand the answer’ and all the bilingual can do when he is asked what language he thinks in is to say ‘Well, it depends . . .’

1.4 Playing with words

Babies and small children love playing with language. Before they can produce actual words, they will spend long stretches repeating the same sounds apparently just for fun. Children who can only say very few words will use them to sing themselves to sleep. Playing with sounds and words in this way seems to be a completely spontaneous activity in children; it is also an important part of the learning process and it is an activity which the child will continue to perform with various degrees of complexity, going from bad jokes to humming songs to writing poetry, throughout his adult life.

‘Lullation’, as this behaviour is sometimes called, serves much the same purposes, and gives the child much the same sort of pleasure, as do nursery rhymes and all sorts of verbal activities and games later on. Amongst the purposes there is obviously the learning through repetition of basic words, sounds and structures, but the high proportion of ‘nonsense’ – expressions like ‘ring a ring of roses’, ‘Humpty Dumpty’ and ‘hey diddle diddle’ – is surely there at least as much for the fun of it.

This point is more important to the parents of bilingual children than might at first seem to be the case, because some parents worry that it is a symptom of confusion, since naturally the bilingual child will call on both
his repertoires to ‘talk nonsense’: in a sense it is, but it is also the process of getting it all sorted out. To put it another way, in what sense is: ‘Beurre, bird, butter, beurre’ chanted dozens of times, inferior as word-play to: ‘Hickory, dickory dock, the mouse ran up the clock’ or: ‘A tisket, a tasket, I’ve got a little basket’, and in what sense is it more ‘mixed’ than such rhymes?

Far from being an alarm signal of any kind, verbal play of this kind should be seen as a healthy, normal stage for any child to pass through. Indeed, one might almost go as far as to say that it is in cases where the child does not do this sort of thing that the parents should start getting worried. Generalisations of this kind are dangerous, though, so for the moment we will limit ourselves to the observation that a very high proportion of the parents of productive bilinguals in our study mentioned an early period of mixing, which seems usually to have occurred between one and a half and three years of age. This ‘statistic’ must be taken with more than a pinch of salt: firstly because of the considerable variation between children in these matters, secondly because it is based on parents’ recollections of how their child developed, not on any stricter form of observation.

1.5 Communicating while learning

From the moment a child reaches the ‘two-word’ stage his ability to express himself increases enormously and he starts producing utterances which look like adult sentences. He also becomes more efficient in his conversational routines and in exchanging information. Another important development is that he begins to indicate that things do not exist or that he does not want something, by putting ‘no’ in front of the names of objects.

However, at the beginning of this stage the child still makes no use of ‘link words’ (‘to’, ‘off’, ‘the’, ‘and’, ‘if’, etc.) nor does he put grammatical endings (‘runs’) at the end of words. These words and endings are gradually added during the years that follow: again, the time taken will depend to some extent on the individual child, but it also depends on the language in question. Some languages (for example, Finnish, Russian) have more word endings than others, so naturally children take longer to learn them. This does not mean that such languages are more difficult for children to learn, since all languages have roughly the same degree of complexity: but that complexity can be distributed differently, so a certain area of a given
language can be more difficult than the same area in another language. This is another reason why bilingual children's development of their two languages can vary, in detail, quite considerably.

In English, the first ending to be learnt will usually be ‘-ing’, as in ‘Mummy coming’. This is followed by the genitive ‘s’ as in ‘Mummy's car’ and then, much later, by the plural ‘s’ as in ‘cars’.

Perhaps more important, the child now learns that word order also varies and changes meanings. However, ‘cracking the code’ of word order will take him some time, during which he will make many ‘mistakes’. In very general terms, the problem is one of aligning grammatical structures with possible meanings, of linking language with reality. For example, if he is presented with a toy dog and a doll and told ‘Give the man the dog’, he will give the man to the dog rather than the dog to the man, because in most sentences the noun which follows the verb is the person who receives something (‘Penny gave John the book’) and he has not yet learnt that in real life you usually give people pets and not vice versa.

Another area of difficulty related to word order is questions. Typically, children will start by using ‘question words’ such as ‘where’ and ‘what’, but without making the necessary changes in the order of the words which follow. For some time, they continue to produce sentences like: ‘What time it is?’

As the child’s language slowly develops, he also becomes a more sophisticated interactor. This is reflected in his use of pronouns: he starts calling his mother and father ‘you’, for example. This is an important step, since it shows that he is no longer limited to expressing himself, that he is now aware of the separate existence of others and can relate what he is saying to them. Indeed, it is fascinating to note that this development usually coincides with the time when the child turns his picture book the right way up when he wants to show it to someone: he has realised, quite literally, that there are other points of view.

Once the child has made this distinction between ‘I’ and ‘the others’, his personality begins to develop; he becomes more assertive when he plays with other children, but on the other hand he also starts cooperating with them. It is now that he starts playing with other children, his linguistic and social development going hand in hand, as will be seen if he attends some kind of playgroup. This is partly why children starting or consolidating a ‘second’ language under these circumstances invariably learn it so quickly, easily and well; their whole being is directed to that purpose at a time of maximum readiness and opportunity. They are not learning about the language, they are learning in the language through using it.
By the age of five or thereabouts, the majority of children have cleared the major hurdles of ‘grammar’, but will still make a number of errors. Here, as elsewhere, individual variation can be extraordinary – which is one reason why we have been careful not to state ages at which any of the phases we have discussed ‘should’ or ‘will’ be reached. The celebrated cases of Einstein, who did not speak till he was three, and of Runeberg who waited until he was four and then went on to become Finland’s national poet, should not be interpreted as meaning that all children who do likewise will become great mathematicians or writers. But they are a useful reminder that parents do often worry unduly about their children ‘not doing what the books say they should be doing at that age’ when there is no cause for concern.

We will be returning in more detail to the development of the bilingual child in Chapter 4. For the moment, though, we are going to look at a number of basic ideas about language which might be helpful to parents trying to understand what it is that their child is learning.

Some general ideas about language

1.6 ‘Languages’ and ‘dialects’

There are between three and five thousand languages spoken in the world at present. The vagueness of this figure is due to the fact that there is no way of distinguishing between dialects and languages on linguistic grounds alone. We all speak a dialect and we all have accents. Moreover, linguistic boundaries only rarely coincide with political or geographical boundaries; if you start walking through France from Calais and go all the way to the southern tip of Italy, you will never find two adjacent villages where inhabitants do not understand one another, yet at some ‘point’ you will have gone from French to Italian. In fact, it is more accurate to say you will have gone from France to Italy, since the border is national and political, not linguistic.

Certain dialects, or groups of dialects, have greater prestige than others, and it is these which we usually refer to as ‘languages’. But this prestige has nothing to do with the intrinsic qualities of the dialects in question. They are not more beautiful, more logical or older than the other dialects. Their prestige springs from their uses and their users. Such dialects are usually those spoken by the educated and the upper classes; they are the ones used in the official administration and education of the country; they have a written form and have been studied and standardised. The word ‘language’ is a social and political label we attach to a dialect that is officially
recognised. This is why, when there is disagreement about the status of a dialect, the conflict is inevitably political in nature. For example, when people argue as to whether Breton, Scots or Basque is ‘a language’, they are usually arguing about the degree of political autonomy of the speakers or the region where the variety in question is spoken.

Because languages are not distinguished from dialects on linguistic grounds, it is quite possible to find separate official languages that have more in common than other dialects of the ‘same’ language. For example, we speak of the ‘Scandinavian languages’ – Norwegian, Danish and Swedish – even though they are very similar and often mutually comprehensible. On the other hand, we speak of ‘dialects’ of the Chinese language even though at least eight of these dialects (or rather families of dialects) are mutually incomprehensible. Words like ‘Norwegian’ and ‘Chinese’ are political, not linguistic statements: they tell us that the area in question is a separate nation. As it has often been said: ‘a language is a dialect with an army and a navy of its own’.

In many places, people speak two dialects. When these are officially recognised as languages, we say that such people are ‘bilingual’, but in purely linguistic terms anyone who has two different forms of speech available is bilingual. When Philip Riley was a grammar-school boy in the London of the 1950s, he and his classmates received elocution lessons in Standard English and their cockney accents were frowned on at school, so that most of them spoke differently at home and at school. In the same way, the German businessman who ‘puts on his regional accent with his slippers in the evening’ is just doing what bilinguals do. This, again, is why it is so difficult to count languages, dialects and bilinguals: there are no clear dividing lines.

The four or five thousand languages of the world differ widely in the number of people who speak them. The average number of speakers per language is estimated to be one million. On the other hand, nations also differ widely in the number of languages spoken in them, the average being about thirty. The idea then, that each country has one language, spoken uniformly by all the people within its borders, is both naive and inaccurate, even though most countries do have a standard dialect or dialects, recognised as the official language or languages.

1.7 The written language and the spoken language

Speech is the primary form of language. It existed before there was any form of writing and children learn to speak before they learn to write.
Many languages are never written and many people never learn to read or write. Speech is fast and fleeting, writing relatively slow and permanent. Both forms have their advantages: speech is immediate, writing leaves a record. Because of the extra time and effort involved, we tend to use the written form for messages which are in some sense more important and to compose such messages more carefully. This does not, however, alter the primacy of the spoken form. Nor does it, therefore, make sense to judge speech by the criteria we use for writing. Anybody who really ‘talks like a book’ immediately strikes us as extremely odd.

Clearly, it is possible to be bilingual in both speech and writing. But it may also happen that a bilingual only learns to read and write in one of his two languages, usually the one he has been educated in.

1.8 Change

The very nature of the written medium makes it resistant to change: this is an advantage, as it enables later readers to ‘consult the record’ more easily. Speech changes considerably more rapidly (though, eventually, these changes will find their way into the written form, too). This is an advantage, as it allows the language to adapt to and to assimilate changes in the way of life of the people who speak it – new inventions, ideas, attitudes and relationships make new demands on the language. A language which cannot respond to these demands is a dead language; change is not, therefore, automatically change for the worse, it is a sign of life.

Most changes occur imperceptibly in our daily lives: we occasionally notice a new word or expression, but then it either drops out of circulation, or we learn it and forget that it was new. Even so, we are usually well aware that we do not speak quite like our parents did, and that our children speak somewhat differently from ourselves. Only if we return from a long stay abroad, or open an old book, does the rate of change really strike us: suddenly everybody seems to be saying ‘absolutely’ or ‘wicked’, or ‘methinks’ and ‘thou’.

Change may occur at any level of a language. If you listen to recordings of BBC wartime news broadcasts now, you will realise just how much has changed as regards pronunciation, for example. It was argued at the time that if the news was read by a northerner or a woman no one would believe it. This shows that changes of this kind are often the expression of social developments. It is interesting to note, though, that the World Service of the BBC consistently uses announcers who have much more ‘upper-class’ accents than those used in the BBC’s programmes produced for Britain.
1.9 Levels of language

Language is a complex phenomenon which has different levels of structure that correspond to different types of organisation. In outline, these are:

i) Sound The ‘raw material’ of language and how it is patterned in particular languages. The ‘sounds’ of English, Dutch, French, etc.

ii) Grammar The structure of words and the structures we make with words (that is, sentences).

iii) Meaning The literal meanings of sentences and the meanings of utterances in real-life situations.

Let us take each level for brief examination.

Sound

Each language uses only a small selection of the vast range of sounds that the human vocal tract can produce. Judgements as to the relative ‘purity’ or ‘beauty’ of these sounds are value judgements which may be subjectively real for speakers but which have no objective basis.

Pronunciation is not just a matter of articulating consonants and vowels in the right place and in the right manner. Other aspects of speech that involve more than single consonants or vowels, such as stress, length, tone and intonation, are just as important.

A speaker’s pronunciation is an index of the social group to which he belongs, wishes to belong or perceives his interlocutor to belong. Our pronunciation varies far more than most of us realise according to the situation we find ourselves in, who we are talking to, whether we are speaking formally or not, rapidly or not and so on. Variations of this kind are not due to ‘carelessness’ or ‘slovenly articulation’.

The relationship between sounds and meanings is, with a very few exceptions (words like ‘cuckoo’), an arbitrary one.

Grammar

Every language has morphological rules for constructing words (we say ‘farm-er’ not ‘er-farm’, for example) and syntactic rules for constructing
sentences. People learning a second language will have the impression that it is ‘difficult’ or ‘easy’ depending on its degree of correspondence with their first language.

There are no ‘primitive’ languages, in the sense of languages that are somehow incomplete or rudimentary. There are, of course, languages spoken by so-called ‘primitive’ peoples: but these are just as complex from the linguistic point of view as, say, Russian, Chinese or English.

There are no languages that ‘don’t have a grammar’. If this were so, communication would be impossible, since speakers and hearers need common rules to express and interpret their intentions: if there were no code at all there would not be any message. Indeed, if a language had no grammar, it would be impossible to learn it: there would be nothing to learn. However, not all grammars are of the same kind; in particular, we need to free ourselves from the idea that grammar is exclusively a matter of word endings or sentence construction. Relations between words (that is, grammatical rules) can be signalled in many other ways, including rhythm, tone and word order. For example, we often hear that ‘English is easy’ because ‘it doesn’t have much grammar’ (here, ‘word endings’). Compared to, say, German or Finnish, this is true. But does this really mean that English is ‘simpler’ in some absolute sense? Not a bit of it! In English, word order is extremely complex and signals many of the relations that word endings signal in other languages. Consider, for example, the following perfectly ordinary English sentence: ‘Some of the striking lorry-drivers had driven four abreast up the M1’. Now try to alter the position of even one of the words in this sentence. You will find it extremely difficult to do so without changing the meaning. It would be ungrammatical: and a rule that insists on twelve items appearing in one and only one order is an immensely complex one.

The use of English as an international language is not, therefore, the result of its ‘simplicity’ or, indeed, of any other intrinsic virtue. It is the result of historical developments which in themselves are almost entirely unrelated to language. What is true of English vis-à-vis other languages is equally true of the dialects and varieties of English: they derive their status and prestige, or their lack of it, from their functions, their uses and their users, and not from any inherent qualities. It is of great practical value to have a standard form of a language, such as ‘Standard English’, but from a purely linguistic point of view any other dialect would serve just as well: Standard English is not inherently superior in any way, only different. Its status is derived from the fact that it is the dialect of the upper classes (Oxford and Cambridge, the Court, the City, professional associations, and so on) and if they had spoken in any other way, that would be Standard English now. The
objective historical factors determining the selection and emergence of a standard language do not in any way detract from its value and importance as the major form of access to knowledge and to certain social domains.

**Meaning**

The ‘real’ meaning of a word or expression is not restricted to its historical or etymological meaning, words mean what people use them to mean – not necessarily what they *used* to mean. To insist that the ‘real’ meaning of ‘enthusiastic’, for example, is ‘to be inspired by a god’ is either pedantry or a failure to understand what people who use the word nowadays are trying to convey.

Again, the same word usually has a number of different meanings. Only scientifically defined terms such as \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \) have a single unambiguous meaning; ‘water’, on the other hand, can mean a number of different things: ‘He watered the garden’, ‘His mouth watered’, ‘The proposition was watered down’ and so on. We are able to select the appropriate meaning because there are usually a number of other clues in what is said to help us, and because the context often narrows down the range of possible meanings.

We need to distinguish between the meaning that words and sentences have in use, and the meaning they have when they are not in use. The meaning of words in dictionaries or of sentences in grammars is only a part of the meaning they may have when spoken in real life. The relationship between what we *say* and what we *mean* is neither direct nor simple. A sentence like ‘You are not going out’ will have one meaning in a grammar book (its literal or semantic meaning) but in a situation it can be used to perform a wide variety of communicative acts. For example:

- *prohibition* (father to child): ‘You’ve got a cold and it’s raining, so I forbid you to go out.’
- *request for confirmation* (wife to husband): ‘I have to go out myself: you will be in if Fred calls, won’t you?’
- *threat* (kidnapper to victim): ‘If you try to move, I’ll shoot you!’
- *reproach* (father to daughter): ‘You’ve been down the pub every night this week!’

Learning *functional* uses of language of this kind is crucial: language is not just a system for conveying ‘neutral’ information (such as the fact that you are not going out) which is either true or false but nothing more. We also use it to *do* things, like prohibiting, threatening, inviting, agreeing, defining, greeting, persuading and ordering. We use it to express our feelings, to
socialise, to play, to clarify our thoughts, all of which activities involve types of meaning that will not be found in dictionaries or grammars but which, to the speaker, are far more important than the meanings we do find there.

There are other kinds of meaning that occur in real-life interaction but not in dictionaries and grammars. The most important of these is meaning which is based on common knowledge of the way our world is organised. For example, in the exchange:

A: I must get going or I’ll miss my bus.
B: It's half past eleven.

only shared knowledge about the bus-timetable (for example, the time of the last bus) will enable A to know whether B means: ‘You have already missed it’ or: ‘You have plenty of time to catch it’. It is, of course, perfectly possible for two people to speak the same language without sharing the same knowledge in every detail. Every time we meet someone from another family, profession or town we have to provide the relevant information: ‘Oh dear, the last bus was at eleven, I’m afraid you’ll have to take a taxi’.

This is important from the point of view of the bilingual: he speaks the language but, perhaps because he has been living abroad, does not know many of the things that people who speak that language usually know. He may well have problems understanding what people mean that have nothing to do with the language as such, but with the way of life that is unfamiliar to him. Precisely because he speaks the language so well people will take it for granted that he knows things that he does not know but which they would expect to have to explain to a foreigner.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that there is no basis for the belief that certain languages are more logical or precise than others. The logic of natural languages like Norwegian or Spanish should not be confused with the logic of logicians, mathematicians and philosophers. The grammatical structure of a language is not such an ‘objective’ logical system, though the speakers of that language may believe it to be one, especially if they are monolinguals.

1.10 Varieties of language

Language varies over the centuries, it varies geographically, and it also varies from situation to situation. We do not speak in the same way in
all situations, for example, in a law court, a bar, at church, on the phone, at work, at a football match or to our friends, doctors, husbands, wives, bosses and children. A language cannot be accounted for by a uniform set of rules that are always valid and always applied in the same way. Using a language involves a wide range of activities that are governed by social conventions and the social context in which the participants find themselves. To use an analogy, language is not a sport like cricket with its rule book, where all the players are engaged in the same game; it is more like an athletics meeting where sprints and relay races, marathons, jumping, putting the shot and all sorts of other ‘events’, each with its own nature and rules, may take place as part of the same ‘meeting’.

Moreover, just as it is possible to be a champion hurdler without being any good at all at the 5,000 metres, so language users may be better at some linguistic events than others: and no one is ever equally good at everything, since training, personal gifts and preferences and opportunities are not the same for everybody.

The rules of each language event vary according to the nature of the activity: whether the medium is speech or writing, the roles of the participants, their relationships, their functions and intentions and so on. This means that every speaker has a number of different ‘styles’ that he changes according to the situation. To apply the same set of rules to all situations (for example, to insist that only Standard English is ‘correct’ or that one should always use a very formal style) is symptomatic of an inability to grasp just how much we vary in our linguistic behaviour from one situation to another and how much this variation is responsible for the flexibility of language, which enables us to use it for computer programs, advertisements, poetry, business deals and so on. ‘Styles’ may be different as regards pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The skills involved in choosing and employing an appropriate style are exactly the same as those employed by the bilingual when he chooses and employs the language appropriate to a particular situation. There is no difference between the child who learns when to say: ‘Wotcher!’ or ‘Good morning’, the child who learns when to say: Salut! (‘Hi!’) or Bonjour (‘Good morning’) and the child who learns when to say: ‘Good morning’ or Bonjour. In a very real sense, we are all bilinguals: each time we choose between two different forms to express the same idea, for example: ‘Hello, Charlie, nice to see you’ instead of: ‘Good morning, Mr Brown’, we are doing exactly what the bilingual does when he chooses between his two languages.
1.11 Acquiring a language

With the exception of a severely handicapped minority, all children learn at least one language. This has led many linguists to believe that the ability to learn a language is at least partly due to genetic programming which is specific to the human race: certainly, there is no other species that has anything like our communicative capabilities. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that children show a remarkable uniformity in their linguistic development: they go through a number of stages at predictable ages and the order in which they acquire the various structures and functions of language is also highly regular. Of course, this apparently innate capacity to learn a language is not restricted to any particular language (that of our parents, for example): a Vietnamese child brought to France and adopted at birth will learn French, not Vietnamese, and will go through the various stages of development which all French children go through. We may all be equipped at birth to learn a language, but we still have to learn it from someone, that is, from the members of the community in which we live.

At first, our circle of acquaintances is very limited: mother, father and possibly a few relatives. It is during this period that the parental role is most crucial, linguistically speaking, though it remains important for a number of years to come. As a child’s world expands, he begins to meet more people, and to learn from them. Now it is other children who play the most important role in the child’s development. For we are never taught to speak our mother tongue in any formal way (though later at school we may learn a considerable amount about it, which is not the same thing at all).

The mechanisms of this process of language acquisition are the subject of intense controversy and debate at present. In very general terms, the argument is between the ‘structuralists’, who believe that a child builds his own grammar, that is, a series of rules which are generalisations based on what he hears around him, and the ‘functionalists’, who believe that the community provides the child with meanings, which the child then relates to the language. At the risk of trivialising what is a technical and philosophically important discussion, one could say that the structuralists see the child as learning a code (rules which he can then use to create and transmit messages) whilst the functionalists see the child as a messenger whose main interest is in the effects produced by different kinds of message (which he can then use as a basis for cracking the code).

Despite these differences, there are a certain number of points concern-
ing the learning process about which there is now a general consensus. Since several of these are in complete contradiction with what the person in the street thinks about learning, it is worth listing them briefly here.

First, a few points about what learning is not:

– **Learning a language is not simply a matter of repetition.** In fact repetition seems to play only a small and relatively superficial part in the learning process. This seems to be because language is systematic and dynamic: we can only repeat a part of the system, not the system itself. Moreover, if learning a language were merely a matter of repetition, how could we ever produce a sentence we had never heard before?

– **Correcting and being corrected does not have any great influence on the language learning process.** This is shown by the fact that we sometimes learn things straight away without ever being corrected and sometimes go on making the same old mistake, no matter how often we are corrected. When a child produces an incorrect but true utterance, such as ‘mummy spoon’, the mother usually does not correct the child but agrees with him, for instance by saying: ‘Yes dear, what a good boy you are!’ On the contrary, when a child says something which is grammatically well-formed, but which is not true, his mother will disagree. For instance, the child may say: ‘This is Mummy’s spoon’ to which the mother will reply: ‘No, of course not, it belongs to Daddy’. In fact, children are very often corrected for producing grammatical utterances and find themselves encouraged for producing errors. For this reason, it has been said that if learning was a simple matter of correction and encouragement, we should become adults who tell the truth ungrammatically, but of course, we tell lies . . . grammatically!

– **Learning is not a neat, linear process.** It is not like laying a single railway line across an open plain. Instead, it involves wrong turnings, meanders, shunting backwards and forwards, forgetting and remembering. We may take a perfectly correct route, only to find that there is an obstacle across the line: when we go back on our tracks, either to fetch something, to remove the obstacle or to find a different way round it, an outside observer may interpret our behaviour as ‘a mistake’, although we are, in fact, solving a problem.

– **Errors are not necessarily a sign of failure to learn.** They are an essential part of the learning process. When we come to a junction, we may well take a wrong turning but this helps us work out which was the right one. Errors are very often a healthy symptom that learning is taking place: the child who says: ‘I goed’ has learnt an extremely powerful rule for the
formation of the past tense in English. He has not, though, yet learnt that the verb ‘to go’ is, in this respect, irregular.

Now a few points about what learning is:

– **Learning is an increase of the range of meanings that are available to an individual.** Only activities that are in themselves meaningful provide worthwhile opportunities for learning. Even the most ‘superficial’ aspects of a language, such as the difference, say, between the ‘m’ and ‘n’ sounds, are learnt in terms of the meaningful oppositions that they produce, such as ‘mice’ and ‘nice’. This is even more so at the ‘higher’ or more ‘complex’ levels of language.

– **Learning a language is not the same thing as learning about a language.** Just as it is possible to be an expert on the grammar of German without actually speaking German, so it is possible to speak German fluently without having any idea of its grammar. Any explicit idea, that is: all speakers of German ‘know’ German grammar by definition. To say that only grammarians ‘know’ the grammar of a language is like saying that only doctors have bodies.

– **Learning is the product of ‘motivation + opportunity’.** Small children do not usually need any encouragement to learn their language, but they may well need to be given the opportunity. Being cooped up on the twenty-first floor of a high-rise tower block in front of a TV screen is not the rich interactional and linguistic environment that a child needs if he is to master the full range of functions and styles of his mother tongue or tongues. On the other hand, hanging out with the neighbourhood gang might expose the child to a very wide range of words and functions.

– **Language is a social phenomenon and language learning is therefore a social activity.** There are many aspects of language use which can only be learnt in direct, face-to-face interaction with a wide variety of partners.

This last point leads us to conclude on the differences between learning a language at home and learning a language at school. The contrast between language learning at school and at home has perhaps been exaggerated. Indeed, research (Wells, 1981) has shown that evidence for the continuity between the two is much stronger than was thought before. There are differences, however:

– The school social context makes children familiar with interaction that is pedagogically motivated, in contrast with the multiplicity of goals
underlying interactions at home, and also familiarises them with the requirements of conversation involving many participants, in contrast with smaller numbers at home.

- The school also provides the systematic training that helps develop higher levels of symbolic functioning associated in particular with the teaching of reading and writing, which contrasts with the spontaneous, untaught acquisition of speech at home.

Having said that, it is obvious that there is constant interaction between the two learning contexts of school and home. The wider the range of activities and skills developed at school, the more likely that they will be used beyond the confines of the classroom. This is obviously good news for the parents of bilingual children. Absence of formal training in one of the languages is not necessarily detrimental to the development of that language, if such continuity is fostered by the parents at home.