

## 1 *Introduction*

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In the field of child language acquisition studies, the emphasis has so far mainly been on monolingual children's language development. In their quest for explanations of this development researchers have increasingly turned to cross-linguistic studies, comparing with one another monolingual children acquiring different languages (see e.g. the recent collection of papers edited by Slobin 1985b). Such cross-linguistic research has, amongst others, been motivated by the question of the relative importance of language-universal vs. language-specific factors in acquisition (see e.g. Slobin 1985c, Berman 1986, Mills 1986c). It can be argued, however, that comparisons between monolingual children acquiring different languages are not the ideal empirical basis for addressing this issue. After all, in such comparisons most psycho-social variables cannot be held constant, and thus one can never be certain what the precise reasons are for any differences or similarities found in the acquisition patterns of children learning different languages: these may be due to purely linguistic factors, but also to other factors having to do, amongst others, with differences in cognitive development, cultural environment or socialization patterns.

A child growing up with two languages from birth, on the other hand, offers a unique opportunity for investigating general theoretical issues in the language acquisition field, since here the number of possibly influential variables is reduced to a minimum: the bilingual child comes the closest to being the 'perfect matched pair'. After all, the bilingual child is always at the same level of socio-cognitive development, and although he may be exposed to aspects of different cultures, and although the social interaction styles of the various speakers addressing the child may differ considerably if these speakers belong to distinct cultures<sup>1</sup>, the main two variables are the bilingual child's two input languages.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, however, studying bilingual children's language development is not only a worthwhile undertaking with reference to possible explanations of monolingual development, it is also a separate area of investigation with its own unique questions and hypotheses.

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Throughout this century linguists, sociologists, psychologists and pedagogues have held a fascination with the phenomenon of children learning two languages from an early age on. In some of the empirical studies, authors have described their own development as a bilingual (see e.g. Elwert 1959), but most of the others (as is the case in studies of monolingual acquisition) concern reports on bilingual children who are either the author's own offspring or other people's (see e.g. Ronjat 1913).

There are various situations in which children can become bilingual: they may hear one language until they are two years old and only after this start to regularly hear a second language in addition to the first. Alternatively, this second language might entirely replace the first. A third possibility is that children may be regularly exposed to two languages from birth onwards, or at least from very soon after birth. Children may also hear more than two languages. These are just a few of the many possibilities.

McLaughlin (1978, 1984b) makes a distinction between simultaneous and successive acquisition of two languages: he speaks of 'simultaneous acquisition of two languages' when a child has been introduced to two languages before his or her third birthday and applies the term 'successive acquisition of two languages' to situations in which this criterion is not met. McLaughlin readily admits that the third birthday stipulation represents an arbitrary cut-off point. Taeschner (1983) accepts McLaughlin's stipulation, but Padilla and Lindholm (1984) do not. They speak of 'simultaneous acquisition of two languages' only when a child has been exposed to two languages from birth onwards. Anything else they regard as instances of 'consecutive' or 'successive' language acquisition.

It can be agreed with Padilla and Lindholm (1984) that McLaughlin's 'third birthday' criterion is to be rejected on the basis of its arbitrariness. Furthermore, it has yet to be empirically shown that children who grow up with two languages from birth exhibit similar acquisition patterns to children who have been exposed to a second language at, say, the age of one. There is no *a priori* reason to assume that indeed the acquisition patterns would be the same. In fact, the opposite would appear to be more realistic: after all, the child exposed to French after a year's exposure to only Russian might very well, due to his knowledge of Russian (however rudimentary this might still be at age one), start to use French in quite a different way from how a child exposed to both Russian and French from

birth would use it at the same age. A possible underlying reason for such a difference might be the psychological principle that anything learnt has an effect on subsequent learning (see e.g. Kagan 1984). In addition, if any comparisons with monolingual children are to be valid, one must make sure that the basis for comparison is as solid as possible: comparing the acquisition of Cantonese in a monolingual child exposed to this language from birth and in a bilingual child exposed to it only from the age of six months onwards does not permit the disentangling of the two variables 'age of first exposure' and 'exposure to two languages'. It would thus seem that Padilla and Lindholm's (1984) suggestion to speak of 'simultaneous acquisition of two languages' only when a child has been exposed to two languages from birth onwards and to use the term 'consecutive' or 'successive' acquisition in all other cases is a reasonable one.

While I agree with the basic conceptual distinction that Padilla and Lindholm (1984) are making, I venture to suggest that the term 'simultaneous' acquisition of two languages not be used any more, since this term has been used with different meanings by different authors. This has had the unfortunate result that when researchers state they were studying a child 'simultaneously exposed to two languages' it is not at all clear whether the child was exposed to these languages very soon after birth, or came into contact with a second language some time between birth and age three.

Rather than use the term 'simultaneous' acquisition of two languages, then, I propose to use Meisel's (i.p.) term Bilingual First Language Acquisition (or, in short, BFLA).<sup>3</sup> Whereas Meisel uses this term to refer to situations in which a child is exposed to two languages from birth, the following definition is perhaps more workable:<sup>4</sup>

BFLA refers to those situations in which

- (a) a child is first exposed to language B no later than a week after he or she was first exposed to language A,<sup>5</sup> and
- (b) a child's exposure to languages A and B is fairly regular, i.e. the child is addressed in both languages almost every day.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, within the BFLA situation there is a lot of variation possible. A child may start hearing two languages on a regular basis from birth onwards, but such regular exposure may cease at age one, with only

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one of the child's languages being used in the child's environment after this. However, most of the studies of BFLA to date have been concerned with children whose regular exposure to their two languages basically continued up to the time of observation, although regular exposure to either one of the languages may have briefly ceased due to holidays, stays in hospital, or other situations in which the person(s) providing the input in a particular language was/were absent. Except when indicated otherwise, the term BFLA in the following will be used to refer to the latter situation, i.e. to circumstances where children's regular exposure to two languages lasted at least up to the time of observation, but allowing for brief interludes in which such regular exposure was absent. For ease of reference, we shall continue to use the phrase 'a child exposed to two languages from birth' as shorthand for the new working definition of BFLA proposed above.

The most frequently asked questions in empirical studies of very young bilingual children have been whether, when and to what extent these children eventually come to speak two distinct languages. It will be argued that so far, this question remains fundamentally unresolved.

A first reason for this is that when asking the question (and certainly when attempting to find an answer), researchers have not usually taken into due account the potential importance of the nature of the child's exposure to his or her input systems. Although it is quite possible that differences in such exposure patterns are irrelevant to the acquisition process, this remains to be empirically investigated. Until such empirical investigations have unequivocally shown that indeed the nature of the child's exposure to his or her input systems has no impact whatsoever on the child's language development, we shall start from the common sense assumption that exposure patterns might well be important, and that it may matter a lot whether a child is exposed to two languages from birth or not, or whether the two input systems are presented separately or not (to name but a few possible variables). Not to recognize the possible relevance of different exposure patterns is unrealistic.

A second reason for why we consider as basically unresolved the question of whether, when and to what extent young children exposed to two languages eventually come to speak two distinct languages lies in the unfortunate fact that those few studies that do furnish sufficient background information on their subjects' linguistic environments often exhibit methodological flaws which make it logically impossible to accept as proven any conclusions reached concerning the issue under discussion.

Another issue that has been of major concern in studies of bilingual children is to what extent these children's language production resembles that of monolingual children in either language. This issue can be seen as fundamentally unresolved as well for the very same reasons as outlined above for the first question. Comparisons between bilingual and monolingual children must, after all, remain vacuous when the basic exposure patterns for the children to be compared are substantially different, or, indeed, are unknown: any differences found between children are then not necessarily relatable to the fact that the bilingual child is learning two languages and the monolingual only one, but may be directly relatable to factors such as the age of first regular exposure to a particular language and the extent to which the bilingual child's languages are presented in a separate fashion or not. Again, it is possible that such differences in exposure patterns are irrelevant, and that bilingual and monolingual children's language productions can be compared with one another regardless of how children came into contact with their languages, but until this has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt, researchers cannot start from the assumption that any differences in exposure patterns are irrelevant. Besides the fact that in drawing comparisons between monolingual and bilingual children researchers have often been comparing data that are not necessarily comparable, many of these comparisons have furthermore been methodologically weak.

In order to approach the issue mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter, namely what can bilingual children teach us about acquisition strategies in general (and thus also in monolingual children), we need detailed descriptive analyses of bilingual children's speech production. Unfortunately, as we shall attempt to show in Chapter 2, the body of proven empirical knowledge in the field of BFLA today is quite small, the result being that most of the available literature does not provide a solid enough basis for addressing this issue. In fact it will be argued that most of our present-day knowledge in the field of BFLA is even too limited to address the two main questions in the greater field of child bilingualism itself, i.e. the questions of the distinctness of the bilingual child's two languages and of the similarities or differences between bilingual and monolingual children's speech productions (see above).

The overall aim of this book, then, is twofold: first, to learn more about the process of bilingual first language acquisition in its own right, and

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second, on the basis of this newly acquired knowledge, to contribute to a better understanding of child language acquisition processes in general.

As pointed out in the preceding paragraphs, the total body of descriptively adequate knowledge about bilingual children's speech productions is very small. Hence it was imperative that new data be collected and analysed. The data to be presented here concern a single child's acquisition of English and Dutch. Since the subject of this study was exposed to her two input systems in a separate fashion from birth, we shall not be able to say anything about acquisition processes relevant to other exposure patterns identifiable in the field of child bilingualism. Any hypotheses set forth here, then, are to be interpreted solely as concerning the one basic exposure pattern where a child regularly hears two languages from birth and where each person when addressing the child basically uses one language only.

Our main concern in the analysis of the data will be to investigate the validity of what we shall term the separate development hypothesis. This hypothesis proposes that a bilingual child's morphosyntactic development proceeds along separate lines for each of the child's languages. Thus, the child's languages are seen as constituting largely self-contained systems. We shall approach the separate development hypothesis from two sides: first, from within the bilingual child's own speech productions, and second, on the basis of comparisons with monolingual English- and Dutch-speaking children.

It will further be argued that if the separate development hypothesis turns out to be an accurate characterization of the bilingual child's morphosyntactic development, this implies that development is very much guided by factors relating to the structural properties existing in the input and that hence language-specific elements play a major role in acquisition.

We regard the empirical investigation to be presented in this book as very much exploratory in nature, the main reason for this being that we see the body of 'solid' empirical knowledge in the field of bilingual first language acquisition to be quite limited indeed. In order to substantiate the latter claim we shall critically review most of the studies on BFLA available in the West today. In this review, which constitutes the first part of Chapter 2, we shall be focussing on methodological issues. The second part of Chapter 2 then considers the status of some major theoretical issues in the field of BFLA, only to find that these issues remain unresolved, partially

because the empirical basis for them is lacking, or because the assumptions underlying some of the issues involved can be seriously questioned.

Chapter 3 introduces the separate development hypothesis and sets the scene for the empirical investigation following it.

Chapters 4 through 10 present a case study of a Dutch-English bilingual child for the age period between 2;7 and 3;4. In this case study, the main emphasis will be on morphosyntactic development, but attention will also be given to the subject's use of utterances containing morphemes from both languages and to signs of metalinguistic behaviour.

Chapter 11, finally, recapitulates the main findings and discusses their implications. Although Chapter 11 could be seen as the formal conclusion to this work, we chose not to call it that, since we regard the research project to be reported on as part of a continuing process of discovery that can only very gradually lend us any better insight in how children learn to speak (almost) like the people around them.

In the Appendix we present the bulk of the data in table format. There are a number of tables present in the main text as well, but these generally only give total figures for the entire period of observation, while the Appendix lists the data per recording session.

### Notes

- 1 Such interaction styles, however, need not be determined by cultural differences: monolingual children growing up in the same culture may be exposed to greatly different interaction styles as well, depending on inter-individually defined variations between interacting speakers (see e.g. Wells 1986).
- 2 In referring to 'the child' in general, we will be using either one of the gender pronouns or both.
- 3 Meisel (i.p.) is a manuscript version of a chapter that at the time of the present book's going to press has been published in Hyltenstam and Obler (1989). Since during the preparation of the present book only this manuscript version was available we shall continue to refer to this version only.
- 4 Meisel's characterization is ambiguous: for instance, is it to be interpreted literally as meaning that in order to 'qualify' as a case of BFLA a baby would immediately after birth have to hear two languages spoken at once, or is a more liberal interpretation acceptable in which it is enough for a child to have heard two languages spoken alternately soon after birth?
- 5 The stipulation of a week was chosen because this would probably be the usual maximum period, even for children of mixed marriages, that initial contact with more than one language might be non-existent or difficult: at least in Western industrialized countries, a week would probably be the usual maximum period that a healthy newborn and its mother would spend in hospital after a hospital birth before going home, i.e. to an environment where a second language was used besides the language used by mother and/or nursing staff.

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- 6 Although most of this book will be looking at the acquisition of two languages only, it is of course possible that children are exposed to more than two languages at an early age. No claims are made here about either differences or similarities between these two situations.



## ***2 Bilingual first language acquisition: methods and theories***

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The study of children growing up with two languages from birth is comparatively new. As with any new area of investigation, there is an initial period for seeking a satisfactory method and paradigm in which to carry out valid work. This initial period is now perhaps starting to fade away: the clearest sign of this is that in general books on bilingualism, reference is made to findings from studies on young bilingual children in which these findings are presented as facts and generally accepted truths (see e.g. Grosjean 1982). Another sign is that scholars in first language acquisition are also starting to refer to findings from studies of young bilingual children (see e.g. E. Clark 1985). A third sign is the recent publication of various books on bilingual children aimed at answering parents' and other educators' questions on how to bring up children bilingually (see e.g. Kielhöfer and Jonekeit 1983, Arnberg 1987, Harding and Reilly 1987, Saunders 1988). In these books, findings from fundamental research are often quoted or taken as starting points for practical advice to parents and teachers.

The question now is: can indeed most of the findings from the available studies be taken as proven, unquestionable facts? Is there consensus in the field about these findings and how to interpret them? In other words, has a unified research paradigm developed that is methodologically sound enough to address theoretically pertinent issues?

It is the aim of the first part of the present chapter to examine the latter question. After this, we shall go on to discuss the theoretical repercussions of the answer to this question. We shall then also investigate whether what is often presented as factual information about bilingual children can indeed be seen as underpinned by methodologically solid fundamental research.

### **2.1 Methodology in studies of BFLA**

In this section we present a method-oriented review of most of the empirical studies on bilingual first language acquisition readily available in

the West today that present new data. Overviews such as the ones by McLaughlin (1978, 1984), Redlinger (1979), Lindholm (1980) and Padilla and Lindholm (1984), then, are excluded; Leopold's (1953) excellent article was not included either, since it primarily aims to test Jakobson's theories on language acquisition against data already reported on in Leopold's previous work; similarly, Leopold's (1978, c. 1954) article was excluded too, since it basically contains a summary of Leopold (1970, c. 1939-49).

In the review here, we shall only consider studies of young bilingual children, i.e. of children under the age of five, since most of the theoretical questions concerning BFLA pertain to the earliest stages of language acquisition. Excluded here because the subjects were older than five are - to name but a few - the studies by Kessler (1971), McClure and Wentz (1975), Tsushima and Hogan (1975), Chun (1978), Cummins (1978b), Hakuta (1978, c. 1974), Huang and Hatch (1978), Wong Fillmore (1979), Linnakylä (1980), Snow, Smith and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1980), Appel (1984) and Pfaff (1985).

A further limitation of the review here is that only naturalistic studies will be considered. We thus exclude from detailed review the non-naturalistic studies (i.e. experimental studies or formal test procedures) carried out by for instance Ianco-Worrall (1972), Bain (1976), Doyle, Champagne and Segalowitz (1978), Jarovinskij (1979), Lindholm, Padilla and Romero (1979), and Chesterfield and Pérez (1981). Experimental studies and formal test procedures are particularly useful for testing specific hypotheses about phenomena previously observed in natural settings. This in turn implies that one already has available data obtained in a naturalistic fashion, so that one has a 'base-line' to start from. For the study of bilingual children, the field at this point in time does not, I believe, have at its disposal an extensive body of generally accepted knowledge about these children's language development. At best, our knowledge is fragmentary (obviously, we have yet to demonstrate that this is indeed the case). In this situation, the time is not ripe for conducting tests or experiments with young bilingual children, and it is not clear how at the present moment any results from the few test procedures and experiments that have been carried out with young bilingual children as subjects should be interpreted. For any realistic interpretation to become possible, we first need many more studies of bilingual children's naturally occurring speech production.