The Bilingual Child

How does a child become bilingual? The answer to this intriguing question remains largely a mystery, not least because it has been far less extensively researched than the process of mastering a single first language.

Drawing on new studies of children exposed to two languages from birth (English and Cantonese), this book demonstrates how childhood bilingualism develops naturally in response to the two languages in the children’s environment. While each bilingual child’s profile is unique, the children studied are shown to develop quite differently from monolingual children. The authors demonstrate significant interactions between the children’s developing grammars, as well as the important role played by language dominance in their bilingual development.

Based on original research and using findings from the largest available multimedia bilingual corpus, the book will be welcomed by students and scholars working in child language acquisition, bilingualism and language contact.

VIRGINIA YIP is Professor in Linguistics and Modern Languages at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact

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Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact is an interdisciplinary series bringing together work on language contact from a diverse range of research areas. The series focuses on key topics in the study of contact between languages or dialects, including the development of pidgins and creoles, language evolution and change, world Englishes, code-switching and code-mixing, bilingualism and second language acquisition, borrowing, interference, and convergence phenomena.

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The Bilingual Child

Early Development and Language Contact

Virginia Yip
Chinese University of Hong Kong

Stephen Matthews
University of Hong Kong
For our children:

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength . . .

Psalm 8:2

「…從㜲孩和吃奶的口中建立了能力…」

詩篇第八章第二節
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Series editor’s foreword

The series Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact was set up to publish outstanding monographs on language contact, especially by authors who approach their specific subject matter from a diachronic or developmental perspective. Our goal is to integrate the ever-growing scholarship on language diversification (including the development of creoles, pidgins and indigenized varieties of colonial European languages), bilingual language development, code-switching and language endangerment. We hope to provide a select forum to scholars who contribute insightfully to understanding language evolution from an interdisciplinary perspective. We favour approaches that highlight the role of ecology and draw inspiration both from the authors’ own fields of specialization and from related research areas in linguistics or other disciplines. Eclecticism is one of our mottoes, as we endeavour to comprehend the complexity of evolutionary processes associated with contact.

We are very proud to add to our list The Bilingual Child: Early Development and Language Contact by Virginia Yip and Stephen Matthews, a most authoritative book that combines the latest scholarship on language contact and child language development in a multilingual setting. It has the distinction of being based on the most extensive longitudinal database on the subject matter to date, involving a relatively large population of children studied over a long period of time, and contributing to the relevant research areas insights from an examination of typologically and genetically quite unrelated languages: Cantonese and English. Three of the protagonists are the authors’ own children, whose speech constitutes the core and largest part of the database. These data are compared with those obtained from children in similar bilingual families, in inter-peer interaction settings which generated the most naturalistic and reliable data an investigator can collect. This book presents findings from this unique gold mine.

Students of various aspects of language contact must be asking any subset of the following questions and others: Are children really perfect language learners? If they are, do they manage to keep separate the systems of the different languages to which they are concurrently exposed? If they are not, to what extent do their transfer phenomena differ from those of adult L2 learners? What particular insights can the study of such a population contribute to scholarship
on community-based language contact phenomena, such as the emergence of creoles and indigenized Englishes? Can the labels ‘L1’ and ‘L2’ apply to situations of bilingual child development, or is it more appropriate to speak of ‘dominant’ and ‘subordinate’ languages? Are these situations inherently different from those in which the child is exposed to different dialects of the same language? Will having a dominant language affect the direction of transfer from one language to the other? Is there some sort of division of labour in the way one language influences the other, for instance, morphology in one case but syntax in the other, one particular aspect of syntax in one language but another in the other language? What is the role of the social ecology in determining language dominance in bilingual children? In such populations, to what extent does one child replicate another, and under what particular conditions?

These are among the many questions that Virginia Yip and Stephen Matthews address in this exciting book. Even if some readers disagree (on some details) with the authors, they will find substantive information and theoretical challenges prompting them to rethink their own positions. In my own personal case, with my own bias that ‘language acquisition’ is a misnomer for what is otherwise a ‘system-construction’ process by the learner, I have enjoyed learning more about how competition and selection operate in a multilingual feature pool and what ecological factors influence the young learner’s selections. I am more convinced now that language boundaries are more real to the linguist than they are to the speaker, although the latter aims at speaking one rather than the other language on a particular occasion. There must also be some constraints on how elements from separate languages can be combined into a new system (not necessarily along the lines sought by students of code-switching), and The Bilingual Child addresses this kind of issue. By the same token it seems necessary to distinguish between, on the one hand, features imported intact from the other language into the one intended to be spoken and, on the other, those modifications that are taking place in a particular language because the structures of the languages in contact are partly congruent.

This book, to which I do more justice by enumerating some of the questions it addresses than by attempting to summarize, is a rich addition, with new sets and kinds of data, to the literature on language contact. I am sure most scholars tired of repetitions of the same kinds of data that do not question established positions will be happy with The Bilingual Child, especially because its tenor is also non-polemical. I feel especially privileged that the authors chose Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact as the venue to disseminate their findings.

Salikoko S. Mufwene, University of Chicago
Preface

Compared to mastering a single language, the process of becoming bilingual in the child’s first few years of life has been much less comprehensively studied, and therefore remains all the more enigmatic and intriguing. The title of this book, *The Bilingual Child*, is intended to refer generically to a child who learns two languages in early childhood. The book tells the stories of how six children became bilingual in Cantonese and English given exposure to both languages from birth. We provide a detailed account of how childhood bilingualism develops naturally in response to the two languages in their environment. This intimate account is presented through our dual perspectives as parent-researchers continuously observing and participating in our own three children’s bilingual experience.

Parents and researchers alike often raise basic questions such as the following about children’s bilingual development:

- Are two languages too many for a child?
- Do children confuse the two languages?
- Can they be equally proficient in both?
- If children have a ‘language instinct’ as has often been suggested, how does this instinct cope with two languages at the same time?

While the book reports an abundance of research findings, we also hope to alleviate some typical concerns of parents and demonstrate that two languages are not a burden for a child, and that children have the ability to differentiate the two languages from early on. They can develop high proficiency in both, though one language may develop ahead of the other. To account for this ability we appeal to a *bilingual instinct* which enables the child to develop two languages in response to dual input in the environment. With developing knowledge of two languages, young bilingual children are able to produce language forms and functions of stunning complexity as a result of integrating features from two grammars. We shall show that the product often comes about through the interaction of two language systems, reflecting language-specific properties and universal factors.

Though the children studied grow up bilingually in Hong Kong, their experience should in many ways transcend the specificities of this particular context.
and speak to the bigger picture of how children become bilingual. The findings reported here are based on a large-scale multimedia corpus which documents the bilingual development of the six children from age one to four and a half and is now in the public domain. Many of the examples discussed in the book come to life when heard or seen on digitized audio and video files, demonstrating the interactions of the bilingual children in real-life contexts. We have also made use of diary data collected by ourselves in the case of our own children. The combination of corpus and diary data yields a rich database from which the strength of our arguments is derived.

Though each bilingual child’s linguistic and cultural background as well as developmental profile is unique, the process they go through shows some common features that set them apart from monolinguals in interesting ways. In children with one language developing ahead of the other, features of the stronger language often find their way into the grammar of the other language. But the interaction is by no means a one-way street: features of the weaker language also influence the grammar of the stronger language in certain respects. Thus transfer in both directions is found in bilingual development.

Our sub-title, *Early Development and Language Contact*, represents an interdisciplinary effort to integrate insights from two fields. The two languages to be learned may be said to be in contact in the bilingual child’s environment as well as in the mind of the child. Throughout the bilingual child’s development, there are clear and systematic signs that the two language systems interact with each other, shaping the child’s overall development. Looking beyond bilingualism at the individual level, we draw parallels between bilingual development in children with bilingual and multilingual communities. In cases such as those of Singapore Colloquial English, Hawaiian Creole English and other creole languages, contact between languages gives rise to new languages with similar features to those we observe in children’s bilingual development. A second theme of this book is therefore that of languages in contact. We know that languages influence each other. But how does this actually happen? What does the development of bilingual children tell us about the interaction of the languages in contact? Do bilingual children themselves play a role in spreading features from one language to another? To illustrate these possibilities, we shall see that the English our bilingual children produced bears striking similarity to the English spoken in Singapore, known as Singapore Colloquial English, which is born of a multilingual situation in which several varieties of Chinese are prevalent in the environment. This suggests that the way Chinese and English interact in the mind of the child may shed light on the way the same two languages have interacted in multilingual societies such as Singapore.

In the age of globalization, contact between individuals and between communities has become intensified and the bilingual experience will become the norm in many children’s early development. In writing this book we hope to
Preface

raise the awareness of the assets of being bilingual and help bilingual children to affirm and appreciate their dual heritage – especially those born of parents from two different languages and cultures.

The process of language development has often been described as an odyssey, suggesting a journey full of mystery and excitement. We invite the reader to share the highlights of our discovery in the bilingual child’s journey toward active bilingualism in the following chapters.
The research findings reported in this book come from a series of projects that have spanned over a decade of work, beginning serendipitously when our first bilingual child was born. The gestation period for this book has necessarily been a long one, as it took some seven years to produce three bilingual children and another few years to put our ideas together and write up the book. It has taken three ‘co-authored’ bilingual children to witness the process of bilingual development in a close and intimate manner. When we see the structures appear in the first, then the second, and followed by the third child, it is immensely gratifying to confirm the pathway taken by these children on their way to bilingualism. We feel compelled to share what we have observed with interested readers.

We thank Salikoko Mufwene for welcoming this book to the CALC series. Sali has been a source of immense inspiration and support as editor and scholar in many interdisciplinary fields. His meticulous comments have rendered our book much more readable and coherent. Brian MacWhinney has been indefatigable in his pursuit of excellence: we thank him for being the architect behind our multimedia bilingual corpus, his interest in bilingual acquisition and his constructive comments on our manuscript.

Thanks are due to many leading scholars working in different frameworks ranging from emergentism to generative grammar for discussing our work with us, notably Joan Bybee, Stephen Crain, Fred Genesee, François Grosjean, Usha Lakshmanan, Jürgen Meisel, Johanne Paradis, Bonnie Schwartz, Carmen Silva-Corvalán, Rosalind Thornton and Marilyn Vihman. William O’Grady, whose unusually wide spectrum of scholarly expertise spans these frameworks has generously offered insightful comments and suggestions on the entire manuscript. We would like to pay special tribute to the late Rudolf de Rijk, who together with Virginia de Rijk-Chan, produced the definitive Basque Grammar, and whose interest in Cantonese grammar and appreciation of our work has been most inspiring.

We are grateful for the opportunity to present our work at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, where we thank Mike Tomasello for his kind invitation and Angel Chan, Peter Cole, Bernard Comrie,
xviii Acknowledgments

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We thank our former Research Assistants and graduate students who have contributed to our projects. It has been our pleasure working with these young talents at both of our universities. At the Chinese University of Hong Kong: Angel Chan, Winnie Chan, Lawrence Cheung, Gene Chu, Chloe Gu, Simon Huang, Victoria Lam and Linda Peng Ling Ling. Uta Lam has been tremendously resourceful and reliable in her technical support. Graduate students at the University of Hong Kong have included Betty Chan, Chen Ee San, Stella Kwan, Regine Lai, Bella Leung, Ingrid Leung, Michelle Li, Richard Wong and Emily Yiu. Further contributions have come from students from the Cognitive Science Programme at the University of Hong Kong: especially Antonio Cheung, Helen Ching, Samantha Ho, Elaine Lau and Fiona Leung.

We thank our mentors William Rutherford, Jacqueline Schachter, Bernard Comrie and John Hawkins, who have nurtured our interest in grammar, language typology, processing, language acquisition and learnability. Over the years we have enjoyed the friendship and fruitful collaboration of many colleagues, especially Umberto Ansaldo, Lisa Cheng, Samuel Cheung Hung-Nin, Mary Erbaugh, Huang Yue Yuan, Shin Kataoka, Cream Lee, Li Ping, Li Wei, Lisa Lim, Yasuhiro Shirai, Siok Wai Ting, Rint Sybesma, Tan Li Hai, Tang Sze-Wing, and the phenomenal team at CUHK: Gu Yang, Jiang Ping, Thomas Hun-Tak Lee, Gladys Tang and Yap Foong Ha.

This book could not have been written without the unwitting support of our children Timmy, Sophie and Alicia. We thank Kathryn, Llywelyn and Charlotte, their parents and caregivers who participated in our longitudinal study. We thank the Almighty God for the gift of all these wonderful bilingual children. Members of the extended Yip family have been backing us up every step of the way with
Acknowledgments

their powerful prayers and unlimited support. We express our deepest gratitude to each of them, the children’s grandmother Liu Yuk Chun, grandparents Jan and Alan Matthews, their uncles and aunts: Patrick Yip and Linda Lee, Peggy Yip, Dan Yip and Kennis Lam, their cousins: Lulu, Kasen and Darren for providing the best possible nurturing environment for the children to grow up in. We would like to take the opportunity to congratulate Timmy on being awarded first prize by the HKSAR government as ‘Hong Kong Budding Poet 2005–06’ and ‘Poet of King George V School’. We feel blessed and privileged to have combined our research with family life, spending quality time with our children, participating in the recording sessions and keeping a precious diary record of their language development. The vivid images and cheerful laughter that come with the documentation of their childhood bilingualism will be preserved as an indelible testament for posterity. It is difficult to think of a more rewarding research topic than to study one’s own children.

Finally we have been fortunate to enjoy the support of our institutions and their funding organizations. The research reported in this book is fully supported by a series of grants from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project Nos. HKU336/94H, CUHK4002/97H, CUHK4014/02H and CUHK 4692/05H) and direct grants from the Chinese University of Hong Kong (2001/02, 2003/04).

July 2006, Hong Kong

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### Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APS</td>
<td>Argument from the Poverty of the Stimulus</td>
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<td>ASP</td>
<td>aspect marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BFLA</td>
<td>Bilingual First Language Acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSLA</td>
<td>Bilingual Second Language Acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancorp</td>
<td>The Hong Kong Cantonese Child Language Corpus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAT</td>
<td>Codes for the Human Analysis of Transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHI</td>
<td>child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHILDES</td>
<td>Child Language Data Exchange System</td>
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<tr>
<td>CL</td>
<td>classifier</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLAN</td>
<td>Computerized Language Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>COP</td>
<td>copula verb</td>
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<td>CP</td>
<td>complementizer phrase</td>
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<td>CPE</td>
<td>Chinese Pidgin English</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRD</td>
<td>Constituent Recognition Domain</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEM</td>
<td>demonstrative</td>
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<td>DO</td>
<td>direct object</td>
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<td>DOC</td>
<td>double object construction</td>
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<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>determiner phrase</td>
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<tr>
<td>DUR</td>
<td>durative marker</td>
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<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>empty category</td>
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<tr>
<td>HCE</td>
<td>Hawaiian Creole English</td>
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<tr>
<td>HKCAC</td>
<td>The Hong Kong Cantonese Adult Language Corpus</td>
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<tr>
<td>IL</td>
<td>interlanguage</td>
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<td>INT</td>
<td>interjection</td>
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<td>INV</td>
<td>investigator</td>
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<td>IO</td>
<td>indirect object</td>
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<td>IP</td>
<td>inflectional phrase</td>
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<td>LF</td>
<td>Logical Form</td>
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<td>L1</td>
<td>first language</td>
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<td>L2</td>
<td>second language</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLU</td>
<td>Mean Length of Utterance</td>
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### List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MLUw</td>
<td>Mean Length of Utterance in words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mx</td>
<td>grammatical category x in a model language M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>noun</td>
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<td>NOM</td>
<td>nominalizer</td>
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<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>noun phrase</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPAH</td>
<td>Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy</td>
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<td>OV</td>
<td>object verb</td>
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<td>passive</td>
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<td>perfective</td>
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<td>prepositional phrase</td>
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<td>predication marker</td>
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<td>PRT</td>
<td>particle</td>
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<td>PTCP</td>
<td>participle</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>recipient</td>
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<td>RC</td>
<td>relative clause</td>
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<tr>
<td>RVC</td>
<td>resultative verb complement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rx</td>
<td>grammatical category x in a replica language R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAI</td>
<td>subject – auxiliary inversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCE</td>
<td>Singapore Colloquial English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFP</td>
<td>sentence-final particle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA</td>
<td>second language acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLI</td>
<td>Specific Language Impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVC</td>
<td>serial verb construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>subject verb object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRS</td>
<td>transitive verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Universal Grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAC</td>
<td>verb-adverb construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VO</td>
<td>verb object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VP</td>
<td>verb phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPC</td>
<td>verb-particle construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2sg</td>
<td>second person singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3sg</td>
<td>third person singular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conventions used in the examples taken from the transcripts:

- `[>]` overlap follows
- `#` pause between words
List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; &gt;</td>
<td>repetition of words in the utterance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[//]</td>
<td>retracing with correction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[/]</td>
<td>a speaker begins speaking, stops and then repeats the earlier material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xxx</td>
<td>unintelligible string of words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>