BILINGUALISM IN DEVELOPMENT

Language, Literacy, and Cognition

*Bilingualism in Development* explores language and cognitive development in bilingual children, focusing on the preschool years. It begins by defining what we mean by bilingualism and what the standards are for considering children to be bilingual. Then it examines how children who learn two languages early in childhood develop both linguistic and non-linguistic cognitive skills.

The author presents her own theoretical framework for cognitive development and language processing, which she uses to interpret the differences between the performance of bilingual and monolingual children. Basing her discussion on research conducted with children of different backgrounds, the author examines the following developmental abilities: language acquisition, metalinguistic ability, literacy, and problem solving. The studies – which used various types of methodology – show that bilingualism has a significant impact on children’s ability to selectively attend to relevant information. These findings are related to a number of issues regarding the education and social circumstances of bilingual children. The author considers the implications of her theory for language acquisition and cognitive development of all children.

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Language, Literacy, and Cognition

Ellen Bialystok
York University
The language I have learn’d these forty years,
My native English, now I must forego;
And now my tongue’s use is to me no more
Than an unstringed viol or a harp.

Shakespeare. Richard II. I. iii. 159.

Materia leaned forward and cooed, “Ya Helwi. Ya albi, ya Amar. Te’berini.”
“Don’t do that, Materia.”
“What?”
“I don’t want her growing up confused. Speak English.”
“Okay.”

Ann-Marie MacDonald, “Fall on Your Knees”

The limits of my language means the limits of my world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein
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Parents often ask me for advice about exposing their children to two languages in the home. Typically, one of the parents speaks some language other than English and they are concerned that their linguistic decisions will have consequences for the child’s development. The requests come in many forms (although e-mail has become the channel of choice) and from people with obviously different levels of background knowledge, education, and experience. The motivation for their questions is usually the same – will the child learn English and will the experience of learning two languages lead to either cognitive or linguistic confusion?

These questions are interesting because of the assumptions they reveal about the folk wisdom of childhood bilingualism. First, people intuitively believe that language learning is a fragile enterprise and can be easily disrupted. Second, they assume that languages interact, and that learning one language has implications for learning another. Finally, they expect that what happens with language can impact on the rest of cognition.

All of these assumptions are empirical questions and all of them entail theoretical controversies. Moreover, they are questions for which controlled investigation is difficult, if not intractable. Ironically, it is bilingual children who also provide the most promising forum for their examination and a means of potentially resolving the theoretical disputes. What happens to children’s developing knowledge of language if they are learning two languages at the same time? How do children sort out the words and meanings from the two systems and incorporate them into thought? The questions resonate to pervasive issues in the philosophy of mind, such as the relation between language and thought and the viability of an autonomous language center.

The research and ideas in this book examine the language and cognitive development of bilingual children. The discussion explores these three
assumptions, demonstrating how the study of bilingual children can clarify these basic controversies. The outcomes of that inquiry have implications both for practical concerns regarding the development of bilingual children and for theoretical debates that frame our study of development. My primary interest in bilingual children, therefore, is for the story they can tell us about human cognition and development.

I was privileged to receive the Walter Gordon Fellowship from York University for the year 1999–2000, which released me from my usual responsibilities and gave me the opportunity to work intensely on this book. During the year, I spent time as a visitor in two different centers, each of which provided an indispensable environment for a particular stage of this work. First is the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, where I am grateful to Wolfgang Klein for inviting me and arranging the visit. The Max Planck Institute has a perfect library and an idyllic working environment. It allowed me to spend uninterrupted stretches of time reading and offered me access to a wealth of literature that helped me prepare to write sections of this book. Second is the School of Psychology at the University of Wales in Bangor. This department, in its improbable location, has a stable full of leading scholars who are all generous with their time, personable in their interactions, and stimulating in their discussion. My time there was spent thinking through arguments and discussing ideas, and I am grateful to Nick Ellis for inviting me. The research that I describe from my own laboratory was conducted over the past fifteen years and funded continuously by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. The Council’s continued support has made this work possible.

This work has been shaped by my interactions with friends, colleagues, and students over a period of about twenty years. All those encounters have influenced and clarified my positions on these issues and contributed to the form the argument takes in this book. I fear that attempting to produce the list of names will ultimately do an injustice because of the inevitable omissions. I especially thank everyone who has participated in Friday bagels as this research developed and unfolded over the years.

Writing a book is an intrusion on domestic life and my family has tolerated me uncritically. My daughters Sandra and Lauren are a constant source of inspiration. My husband Frank has undergone an extraordinary journey of his own during the several years I have spent working on this book. Despite facing life’s most serious challenge, he remained selfless, optimistic, and supportive. I am grateful and indebted beyond words.