Observations on the early development of bilingualism in Japanese and English

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This paper looks at code-switching behavior within the speech of two young bilingual children aged five and six. The study is based on ongoing observations of the children within social situations with other bilingual children and their parents, two audio-recorded observations during which their fathers and younger brothers were present, and finally through informal interview discussions with their parents.

Of particular interest is whether the social identities of the interactants are dependant on their choice of language, how the children accommodate their conversational partner's language ability and what influence their parents have over their choice of code. The paper also presents evidence of the two children's language maintenance.

これは５歳と６歳のバイリンガルの子供２人を通し、言語の切り替えの様子について研究したものです。この研究は、上記の子供達と他のバイリンガルの子供達及び、親との関わり方の観察、そして２人の父親や弟達との２回にわたる会話録音、最後に著者による父親達との意見の交換に基づいています。

この研究において特に注目すべき事項としては、話し手と聞き手の役割が言語によって決められるのか、話し相手の言語能力の差に順応するのか、さらに話す言語によって、丁寧さの度合いに変化はあるのかが挙げられます。
ここではまた、この２人の子供達の間でどのように言語能力の維持がなされているのかを示しています。

Introduction.

Bilingual people, by definition, must at some time switch from one of their languages to the other. When an English speaker walks into a Japanese conversation, or when the topic changes from football to sumo, there is likely to be an associated change in languages. This report considers the ways in which two young bilingual children are developing such code-switching behavior, their ability to differentiate between languages and their motivations for code-switching. The report introduces the idea of coerced code-switching and considers the way in which bilingual children's choice of language influences their social identities. Finally, evidence of language maintenance and shift occurring within the two children is presented.

The community's majority language is Japanese, but the children are bilingual in English and Japanese. *Keita*[1], a boy who was 4 years and 6 months old at the time of observation, has an English speaking father and a Japanese speaking mother, whereas *Miyu*, a 6-year-old girl, has an English speaking mother and a Japanese speaking father. With the consent of both children's parents, uninformed recordings were made of the children's natural speech over two weekends.

It is well known that the minority language, English, has a high status in Japan, although only a small amount of the population regularly use it. While there is now a greater emphasis on English within the schooling system, migrants who have English as a first language do not tend to live together within a specific area or community and are relatively dispersed amongst the majority population.

With a growing multicultural society and bilingual population in Japan, it is important that the educational establishment develop a greater awareness of language acquisition, bilingualism and code-switching to promote cultural sensitivity and ensure academic performance is not undermined.

Code-switching

Bilingual people have the ability to code-switch, or "alternate between two regularly used languages during conversation, both between and within sentences" (Greer, 2003, p.13). Gumperz (1982) defines conversational code-switching "as the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (p. 59).

Blom and Gumperz (1972) distinguish between two forms of code-switching:

1. situational switching, where the reasons for the switch can be identified through a change in situation and,
2. metaphorical switching, which occurs for rhetorical reasons and is further defined by Gumperz as a method "to communicate metaphoric information about how they intend their words to be understood" (1982, p. 61).

Whilst there has been some argument as to whether code-switching or language mixing can be applied to bilingual infants there is a generally held belief that, by the age of two, bilingual children are able to notice that input is from different languages (Baker, 2000). Johnson and Wilson (2002), cite research (De Houwer, 1990; Grosjean, 1998; Paradis, 2001) that suggests children raised bilingually from birth realize from the beginning they are learning more than one language. This is supported by Kuhl's (1994) study which shows that Japanese babies can detect the difference between the /l/ and /r/ sounds. Unless being raised bilingually this ability begins to disappear after six months as the child focuses on his or her native language.

Like other aspects of their language development, young children's ability to alternate between languages may not be as refined as that of adult bilinguals. Hammink (2000)

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[1] **The names of the children have been changed.**

suggests that the code-switching behavior of young bilinguals reflects simple adaptations to the linguistic abilities of their conversational partners or the use of the more readily available lexical item. She suggests other uses of code-switching, such as emphasizing a point, demonstrating ethnic identity or group solidarity, or excluding individuals from the conversation, develop gradually in older children.

Redlinger and Park's (1980) study of four young bilingual children aged between one and three years showed a high frequency of mixing which rapidly decreased as they became more adept with their language skills.

Observations

Language Use

Keita

Aware that his father is unable to function in Japanese, Keita switches between languages depending on which parent is speaking to him and to whom he wants to speak. Even when there is no need, Keita at times translates his parents' conversation and advises one parent what the other has said in the appropriate language. It is already apparent that Keita is more proficient in Japanese and this is noticeable when his father asks for a sentence delivered in Japanese to be repeated in English. Keita's mother will at times tell him to "speak English to your father if you want to be understood", which is, in effect, a form of coerced code-switching.

When Keita is unaware of an appropriate word or phrase, his conversation will come to a halt while he searches for the right word. If unable to do so he appears slightly embarrassed, but does not switch between languages to complete the sentence. Keita usually seeks help from his mother in such situations.

Keita's playful use of both languages is also observed when he knowingly mixes both

languages to provoke a humorous reaction from his parents. While this observation supports Gumperz's view (1982) that code-switching is rarely motivated by the speakers' "inability to find words to express what they want to say in one or the other code" (p. 65), Gumperz's observations did not consider the developmental stage of young bilinguals in their endeavor to become proficient code-switchers. Holmes (2002) also emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between borrowing for a lexical need and code-switching. She reports that "people who are rapidly code-switching tend to switch completely between two linguistic systems – sound, grammar and vocabulary" (2002, p. 43).

Outside the home the predominant language is Japanese, which is Keita's preferred code. Keita attends a Japanese kindergarten. When observed with Japanese children he very rarely code-switches. Even if his English-speaking father is present at the kindergarten Keita is reluctant to use English in front of his friends. Keita will listen or carry out instructions from his father, yet communication is largely non-verbal. For example, instead of speaking, he might nod or shake of his head, or use his arms to tell his father to stay or facial expressions and incomprehensible sounds to indicate pleasure. I am inclined to attribute his reluctance to use English in these situations to the fact that he does not want to appear 'different' in front of his friends.

When playing with bilingual children, however, his use of code-switching increases and Keita does not seem to be concerned with speaking English in the presence of his father. Social situations and changes within linguistic domains appear to play a major role in Keita's choice of language and use of code-switching.

Despite his young age, my observations of Keita suggest that his choice of language is also used to indicate ethnic identity. Amongst his Japanese friends his language choice is Japanese, even with his father present. Yet amongst bilingual children and parents of various nationalities he seems to accept that he is biracial and bilingual.

Miyu

Miyu alternates between languages competently and appears to remember with whom she can and cannot code-switch. When observed at play with Keita, Miyu often code-switches even though Keita tends to respond only in Japanese. When Keita's father is present, Miyu's use of English increases, as does that of Keita. Miyu's (Japanese-speaking) father comments that at home his child will converse in the majority language with him and the minority language with her mother, but quickly switches between languages when both parents are speaking. Outside the home, situational code switching continues to take place. Baker reports (2000) that bilinguals quickly learn to recognize in what social situation and with whom they can and cannot code-switch.

An interesting observation made by Miyu's parents is that when Miyu is playing with Keita's younger brother she always uses English. No switching takes place. As soon as Keita enters the room Miyu converses in Japanese with Keita and English with his younger brother.

I would suggest that there are three possible reasons for Miyu's decision to code-switch the way she does. Firstly, this implies that Miyu is able to consider an appropriate language choice based on her conversation partners. Lolita, an eight year old participant in Zentella's (1997) study of Puerto Rican children growing up in New York, designed her utterances according to the interlocutor based on the following observations:

1. Physical features: Spanish for Latinos and English for others.
2. Gender: Spanish for women and English for men.
3. Age: Spanish for infants and the elderly, English for others.

Miyu may likewise be choosing her language based on the difference in physical

appearance between Keita and his brother. Keita resembles both his mother and father in looks whereas his brother largely takes after his (Anglo) father. Therefore, it is possible Miyu is basing her code-switching on phenotypical appearance.

The second possibility is that Miyu is conscious that Keita's preferred language is Japanese. Keita is well aware of Miyu's language ability and so when Miyu speaks English, Keita confidently replies in Japanese. There is no break in the conversation and Miyu tends to choose Japanese as the language in which to converse because Keita refuses to change. This then implies that Miyu is accommodating Keita's language choice.

The third possibility is that, although limited by his age, most of the language Keita's younger brother's produces is in English. For this reason Miyu probably presumes his preferred language is English. Hammink (2000) notes that in Genishi's study (1976) of code switching and code choice amongst bilingual kindergarten children, the language choice of young children is mainly determined by the language proficiency of their conversational partners. The six-year-old children observed in Hammink's research either maintained a conversation in Spanish or English or switched between the two languages, as the participants required. Holmes (2000) notes a major use of code-switching is to make allowances for other speakers' language ability.

Keita's parents suggest that the reason his brother is producing more English is because he is exposed to a greater level of English within his home. His mother has spoken both English and Japanese to him from birth. The language used between Keita's parents is English and Keita is also contributing to the amount of English at home through his ability to switch between languages and by speaking English to his father. With Keita both English and Japanese were separated for three years as both parents addressed him exclusively in their native language.

For young children, experimentation is important. Keita and Miyu tend to presume all white Europeans speak English. Miyu in particular will confidently switch to English using physical appearance as the basis for such decisions. Keita was caught off guard when a Polish adult used Japanese with him and not English. The Polish adult then began switching between English and Japanese as the two played which resulted in Keita code-switching as well. Baker (2000) notes that children tend to code-switch only when they are talking to people who understand both languages.

Codeswitching behaviour

Aims

In addition to determining the children's motivations to code-switch I am interested to see if their roles or social identities change with their choice of language. For example, a child may take a dominant role while using Japanese and a lesser role while using English or may participate more in conversation with one language than another.

Based on the recorded conversations, this section discusses the way that the children's competence, and therefore confidence, can effect the way they alternate between languages. It also examines in detail one incident in which their language choice was dictated by their parents, in a case of what I will refer to as coerced code-switching.

Recordings

Audio recordings were made over two weekends at a school where I teach. Keita and Miyu often play there and are very familiar with the layout, such as where all the toys, books, crayons and paper are. The atmosphere was relaxed and they were able to choose from a number of activities conducive to conversation. Present for part of the first recording and the entire second recording were Miyu's father and the children's younger brothers. Keita's father, David, was present during both recordings.

Analysis

Analysis of bilingual interaction has developed significantly over the last 20 years particularly since Gumperz's (1982) research into conversational code-switching. Gumperz relied "on discourse analysis to isolate the conversational functions of code-switching" (1982, p. 75).

When analyzing discourse that involves code-switching of young children it is important to remember that their motivation to code-switch is limited by their age and development, and a principal motivation is to accommodate their conversation partner. Young bilinguals have yet to discover the many uses of code-switching.

The use of English by the children was largely influenced by the presence of David. There was an increase in the amount of English used when Miyu's father was not present. Considering her bilingual upbringing, Miyu's English ability for her age is surprisingly proficient. The fact that she communicated freely with Keita's father led to Keita using more English despite the fact that it is not his preferred language. Furthermore, Keita did not mind having his English corrected by his father in the presence of the other children. When in an English class with his Japanese friends Keita appears self-conscious about having his English corrected, perhaps because he does think of himself as bilingual and his choice of language matches his choice of identity at the time.

The following transcripts are excerpts from the audio recordings and provide examples of coerced motivation. Translations are in parentheses and comments if necessary are shown in double brackets.

The code-switching that took place between Miyu and Keita's father was often prompted by Miyu's father, such as in excerpt A.

Excerpt A

1. Hikaru:　　みゆ、デビットさんに何が入っているか聞いてごらん。

　　　　　　　(Miyu, go ahead and ask David what's in his coffee.)

2. Miyu:　　　What – what's in your coffee – coffee?

3. David:　　　I've got milk and sugar in my coffee.

In line 1, Miyu's father directs her to ask a known English speaker about his coffee, but is in effect saying, "Speak English to David", which may in fact be a form of coerced code-switching[2]. Miyu did not choose to code-switch, but was requested to do so. Coerced code-switching is no doubt prevalent amongst young bilinguals whose parents have them speak in a language appropriate to a given situation.

David's reply typically requires a minimal response, in this case 'milk and sugar' (line 3). The fact that he responded in full creates an almost teacher-student like relationship which, combined with Miyu's father's prompting, has possibly led to a feeling of pressure. This is in contrast to the relaxed setting and overall informality of the observations and recording of the children.

The conversation continued in excerpt B, highlighting a growing tension between Miyu and her father.

Excerpt B

1. Hikaru:　　みゆ　昨日、何に乗って何処まで行って何を食べたのかって

　　　　　　　デビットさんにお話して。

　　　　　　　(Miyu, tell David what you did yesterday, where you went and what you ate.)

2. Miyu:　　　できない、できない。

(I can't. I can't)

3. Hikaru: じゃ、デビットさんに昨日何を食べたのかを教えてあげて。

(Well, tell David what you ate yesterday.)

4. Miyu: ((no response))

By asking Miyu to tell David what she had done the previous day, including where she went and what she ate, Miyu was confronted with the relatively challenging task of processing three pieces of information. Miyu is aware that her language choice is expected to accommodate David's limited Japanese ability, however this decision making process was removed from her, which may have compounded her anxiety in answering the question. This is likely to have motivated Miyu's refusal to code-switch in line 2.   Obviously aware of the complexity of the question Miyu's father simplifies the question so that it relates to one part of the previous day's activity "what you ate". However, by this time the damage is done and Miyu does not code-switch or even continue with the conversation. Miyu was visibly unhappy at being told what to do on this occasion.

However, ten minutes later without her father present Miyu initiated a short conversation in which David learnt she went on a picnic to a park with her father's friends and her father bought them "McDonalds" for lunch. She wasn't coerced into code-switching; she understood the initial question and switched because the situation determined she had to accommodate David's language skills. The previous day's events were exciting for Miyu and the motivation for her switch was to convey this excitement to David.

It is important to consider the reasons why parents encourage their children to use their minority language. For example, a child may not recognize that a given situation requires them to use a different code until prompted. This may simply be a factor of age

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² **I am indebted to Tim Greer for this observation.**

and experience, which requires guidance in picking up appropriate clues. Such prompting will largely occur in situations outside the young bilingual's immediate circle of family and friends. In this respect, coerced code-switching can be seen to benefit bilingual development.

Within the immediate circle, however, parents need to step back and let their children experiment and find their own way through the complexities of code-switching. Without overdoing it, showing delight with their progress and adding encouragement builds an environment that fosters enthusiasm and positive language attitudes. As David is already within Miyu's immediate circle of friends and is well aware of his language ability, there was no need for her father to prompt her. It is important that children do not associate any form of pressure or anxiety with being bilingual (Baker, 2000).

The dominant language during the observations and recordings was Japanese. Eighty-five percent of the recordings were in Japanese with basically no conversation between the children in English. Keita's preferred language is Japanese and Miyu accommodated her speech to his language choice. Keita and Miyu's younger brothers were likewise aware that Japanese was the preferred language and followed the lead of their peers.

The use of English was typically initiated in response to questions from David or due to the nature of the activities that required some form of instruction resulting in a question-answer situation. For example, when choosing colored paper for an origami activity the requests were naturally directed to David in English accommodating his language ability. When Miyu decided to choose green, Keita changed his request to green, and when Miyu indicated she preferred light green, Keita asked for dark green. During this time there was no use of Japanese nor did Miyu and Keita converse with each other in either language. As soon as the paper was given out and David was no longer involved in the activity, Keita and Miyu resumed their conversation in Japanese.

They were only motivated to switch to English when they wanted to involve David, such as by showing him what they were making.

Language Shift and Maintenance

Despite the fact that in 2002 there were 1.85 million registered foreigners (Japan Times, Feb. 8, 2004), Japan functions as a largely mono-cultural and monolingual society. A majority of Japanese children have little or no regular contact with children of other nationalities, and this is obvious by the amount of curiosity they show towards non-Japanese when shopping or walking past a school. Therefore, the physical appearance of mixed children is often a focus of attention for Japanese children. They do not look 'Japanese'. Children of mixed marriages can feel alienated and in order to 'fit in' may refuse to speak the minority language outside the home and at times even within the home. Parents of mixed marriages where the minority language is English often report that they are concerned about the maintenance of their children's English and the possibility of a shift towards the dominant language. Maher (2002) suggests that it is the linguists, the educators, and the policymakers who are not supporting a multilingual society.

In their study of minority languages in New Zealand, Holmes, Roberts, Verivaki and Aipolo (1993) list several methods for maintaining minority languages including:

1. frequent contact with other minority families
2. the use of the minority language in the home
3. bilingual pre-school and school education
4. visiting the minority parent's home country.

Holmes et al. (1993) note that for many Dutch, German, and Polish families the lack of social interaction has led to rapid language loss of their native languages. The social

interactions between Miyu's and Keita's families are more than a social network. The idea of maintaining, supporting, and encouraging their children's bilingualism is in itself a shared enterprise.

With Keita, the minority language is spoken by his father who is often working and spends far less time with Keita than Keita's mother. Keita attends a Japanese kindergarten and the majority of his friends are Japanese. Maintaining and improving the quality of the minority language is now an objective of the parents. Keita's mother is using more English in the home to help cement what is being acquired or learnt.

Miyu's language maintenance is seen as being more successful and she exhibits a high level of confidence and ability in code-switching. Miyu has lived in her mother's home country and made subsequent visits for stays of up to a month. Miyu is very outgoing and, while not addressed in detail in this study, personality can affect code-switching ability and language maintenance. Whilst there used to be a great deal of contact time with her mother, Miyu's mother is now working and her father has taken on the home duties. This change has seen her younger brother's use of Japanese steadily increasing to the detriment of his English language ability.

Language shift to the majority language is not uncommon, but it often causes anxiety amongst many parents. Baker (2000) reports that even young children pick up the asymmetrical use of language in the family and the community. Any shift away from the minority language will result in language loss, causing the ability to code-switch to diminish.

Conclusion

The ability of bilingual children to recognize and separate two languages from an early age when presented and acquired separately supports my belief that the ability to

code-switch develops at the same time. What may be seen as random language mixing by some may in fact be the child's attempt at, or experimentation with, code-switching. Code-switching can only be maintained if both languages are maintained. Language shift will result in diminished ability to code-switch.

The discourse analysis in this study looks at what motivates young bilingual children to code-switch. Motivation was found to be influenced by the participant's ages and language ability and whether it was deemed necessary to switch in a particular situation. Language accommodation is shown to be a primary reason for code-switching amongst young bilingual children. The concept of coerced code-switching is introduced which in effect removes language choice and may in fact lessen the motivation to code-switch. Further study into the positive and negative aspects of coerced motivation is warranted.

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