A Study of Bilingual Development of a Mandarin and English Bilingual Preschool Child from China to Australia

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Abstract : This project aims to trace the developmental patterns of a child's Mandarin and English from China to Australia from age 3; 03 till 5; 06. In childhood bilingual studies, there is an assumption that age 3 is the dividing line between simultaneous bilinguals and sequential bilinguals. Determining similarities and differences between Bilingual First Language Acquisition, Early Second Language Acquisition, and Second Language Acquisition is of great theoretical significance. Studies on Bilingual First Language Acquisition, hereafter, BFLA in the past three decades have shown that the grammatical development of bilingual children progresses through the same developmental trajectories as their monolingual counterparts. Cross-linguistic interaction does not show changes of the basic grammatical knowledge, even in the weaker language. While BFLA studies show consistent results under the conditions of adequate input and meaningful interactional context, the research findings of Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA) have demonstrated that this cohort proceeds their early English differently from both BFLA and SLA. The different development could be attributed to the age of migration, input pattern, and their Environmental Languages (Lε). In the meantime, the dynamic relationship between the two languages is an issue to invite further attention. The present study attempts to fill this gap. The child in this case study started acquiring L1 Mandarin from birth in China, where the environmental language (Lε) coincided with L1 Mandarin. When she migrated to Australia at 3;06, where the environmental language (Lε) was L2 English, her Mandarin exposure was reduced. On the other hand, she received limited English input starting from 1; 02 in China, where the environmental language (Lε) was L1 Mandarin, a non-English environment. When she relocated to Australia at 3; 06, where the environmental language (Lε) coincided with L2 English, her English exposure significantly increased. The child's linguistic profile provides an opportunity to explore: (1) What does the child's English developmental route look like? (2) What does the L1 Mandarin developmental pattern look like in different environmental languages? (3) How do input and environmental language interact in shaping the bilingual child's linguistic repertoire? In order to answer these questions, two linguistic areas are selected as the focus of the investigation, namely, subject realization and wh-questions. The chosen areas are contrastive in structure but perform the same semantic functions in the two linguistically distant languages and can serve as an ideal testing ground for exploring the developmental path in the two languages. The longitudinal case study adopts a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative analysis. Two years' Mandarin and English data are examined, and comparisons are made with age-matched monolinguals in each language in CHILDES. To the author's best knowledge, this study is the first of this kind examining a Mandarin-English bilingual child's bilingual development at a critical age, in different input patterns, and in different environmental languages (Lε). It also expands the scope of the theory of Lε, adding empirical evidence on the relationship between input and Lε in bilingual acquisition.
Keywords : bilingual development, age, input, environmental language (Le)