Shifting language dominance in bilingual children: why speech & language therapists need to understand codeswitching

Sean Pert
Rochdale Primary Care Trust
University of Newcastle upon Tyne

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Introduction

- What is normal bilingual language acquisition?
- Which language contact phenomena are common in bilingual children’s language?
- How can the clinician differentiate normal bilingual language diversity from disordered language patterns?

What is normal bilingual language acquisition?

- It is inappropriate to compare a bilingual child’s speech and language development with that found in children from either of the monolingual populations.
- “…there are no standardised tests whose norms are based on bilingual children”.
- Variability in exposure means that children of the same age will present with different language dominance.

Genesee et al. 2004: 196
Which language contact phenomena are common in bilingual children’s language?

- **Language contact phenomena include:**
  - **Intersentential codeswitching**
    The language is changed between sentences. Each full sentence is monolingual.
    Milroy and Muysken 1995
  - **Intrasentential codeswitching**
    The sentence contains morphemes from two (or more) languages. More accurately called *intra-clause switching.*
    Myers-Scotton 2006: 239
  - **Convergence / attrition**
    Speech where “…all the surface-level forms from one language, but with part of the abstract lexical structure…coming from another language”
    Myers-Scotton 2006: 271

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**Intersentential codeswitching**

- One utterance is produced in Mirpuri and the next in English
- “Meh salan passanda. I cook really spicy food”
  (I curry like. I cook really spicy food).

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**Intra-clause codeswitching**

- The utterance is made up of elements from both languages, Mirpuri and English
  - Child’s utterance: **daddy chair** uper beh-ta va
  - Literal translation: daddy chair on sit-ing=male is=male
  - Translation:
    - **Target item 8.**
      - (the) man is sleeping (on a chair)
    - **Mirpuri target:** jena su-ta va
      - (man sleep-ing + male is + male)
Codeswitching in bilingual children

- Codeswitching may be:
  - A stable pattern of language usage
  - A new variety of language
  - A sign of convergence and ultimately language loss

- Codeswitching is NOT:
  - A sign of confusion
  - An indicator of language disorder
  - An indicator of poor vocabulary

Pakistani Heritage Population

- UK:
  - In 2001 the community formed 1.4% of the total population and 16.1% of the non-white population, some 747,285 people (terminology and figures National Statistics 2004)
  - Rochdale, UK is a former Mill town in Greater Manchester (Lancashire)
  - 705,357 people residing in Rochdale
  - 7.7% describe themselves as Asian, British Asian Pakistani heritage origin (2001 Census)
  - It is estimated that 1 in 5 primary school-aged children are bilingual and that 80% of these are from Pakistani heritage families

Study

- An expressive language assessment was developed for Pakistani heritage languages: Mirpuri, Punjabi and Urdu
- 167 normally developing Pakistani heritage children were assessed
- 140 provided an expressive language sample
- 88 of these were Mirpuri speakers aged 3;0 to 7;5

Shifting language dominance in bilingual children
Examples of Assessment Stimulus Pictures

Findings: Total Sample

Proportion of Utterances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Mirpuri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code switched</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55%</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Percentage Codeswitching by Age Band

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Band</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mirpuri</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>CS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3;0-3;5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68.72</td>
<td>8.53</td>
<td>23.22</td>
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<td>3;6-3;11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>61.80</td>
<td>8.83</td>
<td>29.37</td>
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<td>60.34</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>32.97</td>
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<td>4;6-4;11</td>
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<td>55.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>5;0-5;5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46.63</td>
<td>11.66</td>
<td>41.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shifting language dominance in bilingual children
Codeswitched Utterances Retain a Monolingual Grammar

- Either Mirpuri phrase order or, less frequently, English word was found
- The number of English insertions did not alter this
- The insertion of an English verb did not change the Mirpuri word order

Example: Noun Insertion

- Child’s utterance: *daddy chair* uper beh-ta va
  - Literal translation: daddy chair on sit-ing + male is + male
  - Target item 8. (the) man is sleeping (on a chair)
  - Mirpuri target: jena su-va
  - (man sleep-ing + male is + male)

Note the Mirpuri word order
Nouns are content morphemes and are inserted into a monolingual Mirpuri frame

Example: Verb Insertion

- Child’s utterance: *jena ladder climb kar-na*
  - Literal translation: man ladder climb do-ing + male
  - Translation: (the) man is climbing (the) ladder
  - Target item 19. (the) man is climbing (the) ladder
  - Mirpuri Target: jena siri cher-na pija
  - (man ladder climb-ing + male is + male)

Note the Mirpuri word order
Verbs are content morphemes and are inserted into a monolingual Mirpuri frame
The verb does not disrupt the SOV word order
Gender agreement with the subject is maintained using an ‘operator’ or ‘helper’ verb
Mixed Compound Verbs

- In Mirpuri
  - Noun + operator: “kuri ishara kar-ni pi”
- In code switching
  - Noun + operator: “bath kar-na”
  - Verb + operator: “mix kar-na”
- 19 novel verbs produced using ‘Noun + operator’
- 26 English stem verbs + operator

Summary

- Intra-clausal codeswitching is normal for this population
- Children’s codeswitched utterances are syntactically and grammatically constrained to either a monolingual Mirpuri or monolingual English frame
- Increasing codeswitching may not signal language dominance shift but rather grammatical sophistication
- Children who are unable to integrate two languages together may have SLI
- Lack of codeswitching in a population where it is common may be an indicator of language impairment

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- National Special Interest Group in Bilingualism, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, UK.

Sean Pert
www.bilingualism.co.uk
www.speechtherapy.co.uk
References


Further Information

- Assessment Development:

- Overview of the MLF and 4M models: