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?

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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".
  Genesee *et al.* 2004: 196
- Variability in exposure means that children of the same age will present with different language dominance.

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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: daddy (he) is sitting on (a) chair
- Target item 8. (the) man is sleeping (on a chair)
- Mirpuri target: jena su-ta va
  (man sleep-ing + male is + male)

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Shifting language dominance in bilingual children

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

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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)
- 205,357 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
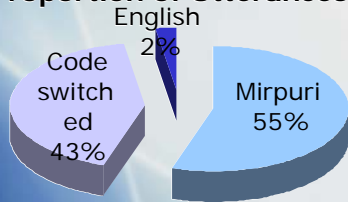- 88 of these were Mirpuri speakers aged 3;0 to
  7;5

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Examples of Assessment Stimulus Pictures

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Findings: Total Sample

Proportion of Utterances

English
2%

Code switched
43%

Mirpuri
55%

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Percentage Codeswitching by Age Band

Age Band	n	Mirpuri	English	CS
3;0-3;5	10	68.72	8.53	23.22
3;6-3;11	28	61.80	8.83	29.37
4;0-4;5	28	60.34	6.69	32.97
4;6-4;11	7	55.75	5.31	38.94
5;0-5;5	8	46.63	11.66	41.72

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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

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Example: Noun Insertion

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

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

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Example: Verb Insertion

- Child's utterance: *jena **ladder** **climb** kar-na*
- Literal translation: man ladder climb do-ing+male
- Translation: (the) man 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

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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

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

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Further Information

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