

*Considering codeswitching in  
the assessment of bilingual  
children*

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# *Codeswitching: definition*

- ✧ 'Code' = language
- ✧ 'Switch' = change from one to the other
- ✧ '...the alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation...'  
(Grosjean 1982: 145)
- ✧ Also called 'code-mixing' by some authors  
(Genesee *et al.* 2004: 91)
- ✧ 'intra-sentential' codeswitching is used for switches within the sentence  
(Milroy and Muysken 1995: 8)



# *Codeswitching is common*

- ✧ '...code-switching is an extremely common practice among bilinguals...'  
(Li Wei 2000: 16)
- ✧ 'Virtually all children who acquire two languages simultaneously code-mix'  
(Genesee *et al.* 2004: 91)
- ✧ '...the early utterances of children growing up bilingually will often contain items from both languages...'  
(Romaine: 1995: 3)



# *Codeswitching is a skill*

- ✧ 'Monolinguals who hear bilinguals codeswitch may believe that it shows a deficit or a lack of competence in both languages'  
(Baker 2000: 53)
- ✧ '...code-switching involves skilled manipulation of overlapping sections of two (or more) grammars, and...there is virtually no instance of ungrammatical combination of two languages...regardless of the bilingual ability of the speaker'  
(Li Wei 2000: 17)



# *Assessment of bilingual communication*

- ✧ 'Children tend to codeswitch only when they are talking to people who understand both languages' (Baker 2000: 53)
- ✧ 'Codeswitched utterances were generally longer than utterances that did not display codeswitching' (Pert and Letts 2006: 349)
- ✧ An accurate assessment of a bilingual child's language ability may therefore only be observed when a bilingual assistant is involved and codeswitched utterances are elicited

# *Case study: Mirpuri-English children in Rochdale, UK*

- ✧ Data were collected from 167 typically-developing children
- ✧ All children were Pakistani heritage exposed to a home language and English on nursery / school entry
- ✧ Languages spoken were:

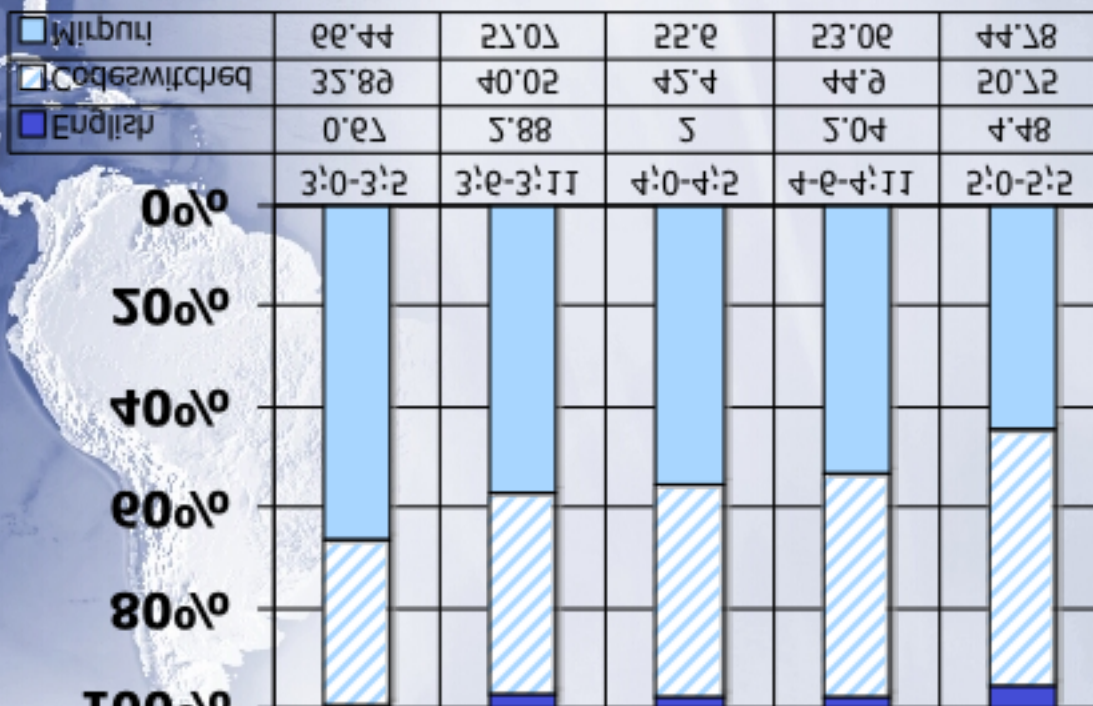
✧ Mirpuri	104	62.3%
✧ Punjabi	27	16.2%
✧ Urdu	32	19.2%
✧ English	4	2.4%

# *Mirpuri - English codeswitching*

- ✧ Mirpuri-English speakers (n = 104)
- ✧ 16 did not provide expressive language data (15.38%)
- ✧ 88 data samples remained
- ✧ 81 data samples were in the age range of 3;0 to 5;5. These samples were analysed
- ✧ The codeswitched utterances were compared to a model of adult codeswitching - The Matrix Language Frame model (Myers-Scotton 1993, 2002, 2005)

# Multi-word utterances

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## *Patterns of codeswitching*

- ✧ One language provides a morphosyntactic frame (frame language)
- ✧ The other language is inserted (embedded language)
- ✧ Content morphemes are inserted into the frame, typically nouns and verbs



# *Patterns of codeswitching*

## ✧ **English noun insertion into a Mirpuri frame:**

✧ Utterance:        **daddy chair** uper beh-ta va

✧ Literal:            daddy chair on sit-ing+male is+male

✧ Translation:     daddy (he) is sitting on (a) chair

✧ Target:            aba kursi uper beh-ta va

✧ Note that the nouns are inserted into the frame in the same positions as Mirpuri nouns

✧ The *Subject + Object + Verb* (SOV) word order is not disrupted, i.e. a Mirpuri frame



# *Patterns of codeswitching*

## ❖ **English noun and verb insertion into Mirpuri frame:**

❖ Utterance:        **boy flower-s smell** kar-na pija

❖ Literal:    boy flower-s smell do-ing+male is +male

❖ Translation:    (the) boy is smelling flowers

❖ Note that the nouns and verbs are inserted into the frame in the same positions as Mirpuri nouns and verbs

❖ The *Subject + Object + Verb* (SOV) word order is not disrupted, i.e. a Mirpuri frame



# *Patterns of codeswitching*

## ✧ **Mirpuri noun insertion into English frame:**

✧ Utterance: girl is drinking **dud**

✧ Literal: girl is drinking milk

✧ Translation: girl is drinking milk

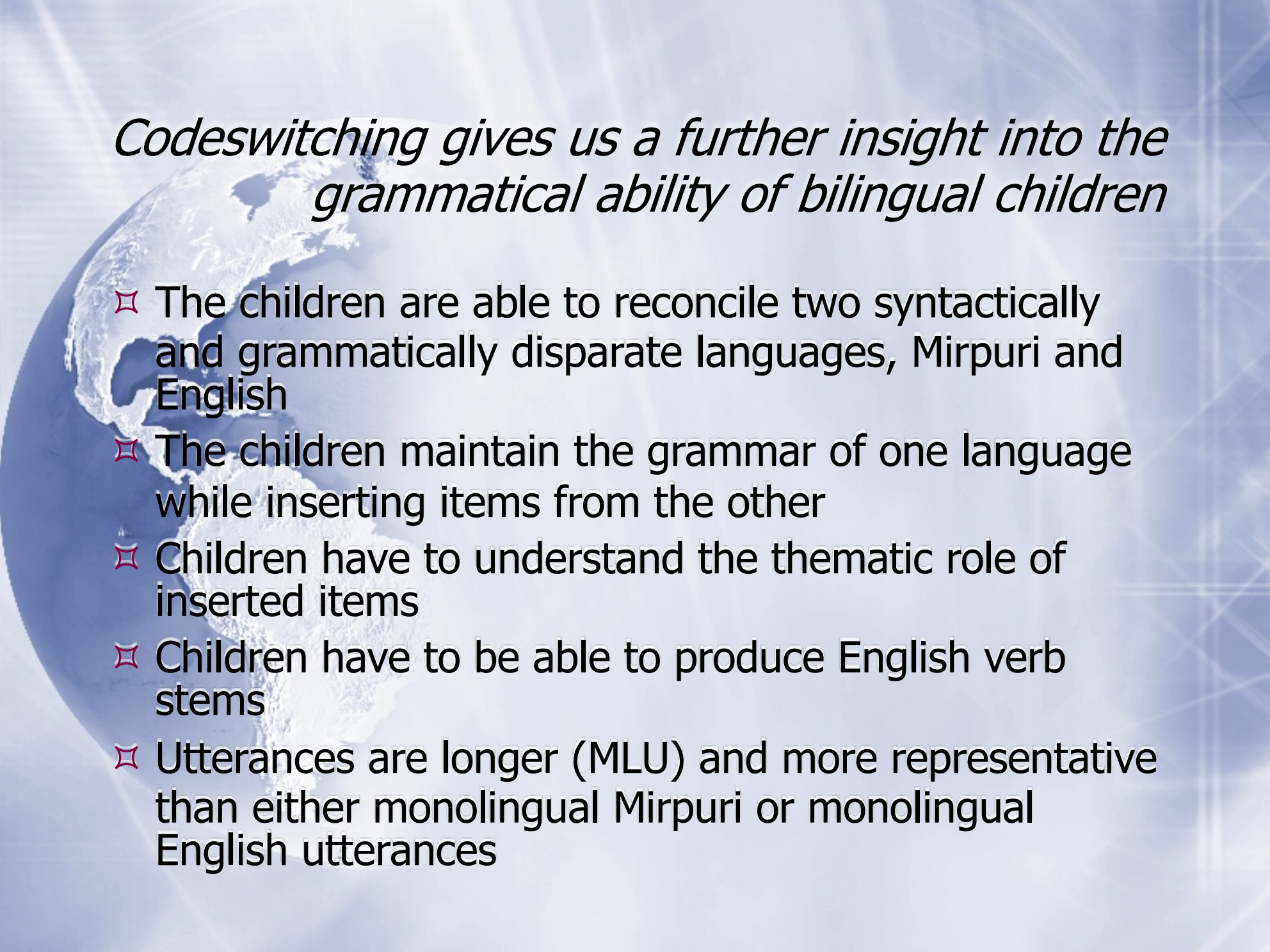
✧ Note that the Mirpuri noun is inserted into the frame in the same position as an English noun

✧ The *Subject + Verb + Object* (SVO) word order is not disrupted, i.e. an English frame



## *Codeswitching is creative*

- ✧ 45 novel verb types were formed from an English noun or verb with a light verb / operator 'kar' E.g. 'clap kar-na', 'push kar-na', 'read kar-na', 'bath kar-na', 'pencil kar-na'
- ✧ Of 583 codeswitched utterances, 575 (98.63%) had a satisfactory Mirpuri frame



*Codeswitching gives us a further insight into the grammatical ability of bilingual children*

- ✧ The children are able to reconcile two syntactically and grammatically disparate languages, Mirpuri and English
- ✧ The children maintain the grammar of one language while inserting items from the other
- ✧ Children have to understand the thematic role of inserted items
- ✧ Children have to be able to produce English verb stems
- ✧ Utterances are longer (MLU) and more representative than either monolingual Mirpuri or monolingual English utterances



# *Summary*

- ❖ Codeswitching is high frequency normal bilingual behaviour and **not** a sign of poor language development or confusion
- ❖ Codeswitching is a grammatically sophisticated behaviour
- ❖ Children as young as 3;6 codeswitch in similar ways to adult bilingual speakers
- ❖ Codeswitching is typically elicited by talking to another bilingual speaker
- ❖ Analysis of codeswitching may give an insight into a child's grammatical skill
- ❖ Lack of codeswitching in a child (from a population where it is common) may indicate that the child requires further investigation for language impairment



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