

Trilingual first language acquisition: exploration of a linguistic « miracle »

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After obtaining my doctorate in Romance Applied Linguistics at the Free University of Brussels in 1993, under the supervision of Professor Hugo Baetens Beardsmore (author of one of the first works on bilingualism), I was offered a job in the French Department of Birkbeck College and my wife and I settled in London. Having been raised bilingually, the issue of bilingualism has always fascinated me. The subject of my doctoral dissertation was synchronic variation in the French interlanguage of Flemish students: I analysed the effect of socio-biographical, psychological and situational variables on their speech production. The birth of my daughter Livia at the end of 1996 stimulated my interest in early multilingualism. A number of studies have been carried out on Bilingual First Language Acquisition but very few deal with Trilingual First Language Acquisition (Hoffmann, 1991; Genesee, 2000; Hamers & Blanc, 2000).

The first study on Bilingual First Language Acquisition was carried out by the French psychologist Ronjat in 1913. He made detailed records of his son Louis' speech from birth to the age of 4;10¹. The family lived in Paris. The mother and nanny were native speakers of German; the father was a native speaker of French. They only used their mother tongue with Louis. Ronjat's study showed that Louis' bilingual upbringing had no adverse effects on his cognitive development; that grammar, phonology and lexis developed in parallel, that the child realised very soon the existence of two languages and acted as an interpreter; that language mixing was always limited and tended to disappear towards his fourth birthday; and that Louis showed a more abstract conception of language. Another detailed study of bilingual development was undertaken by Leopold (1939-1949) who studied the linguistic development of his two daughters in a German-English family where the « one person-one language rule » was respected. The conclusions are very similar to Ronjat's. Leopold also claimed that another advantage of early bilinguality was the sustained attention to content rather than to form and the greater capacity for dissociating a word from its referent.

As no systematic research has been carried out – to my knowledge – on trilingual (or quadrilingual) first language acquisition, I realised that Livia's linguistic development would be an obvious research project and I have been video-recording her at regular intervals. A linguistic diary allows me to write down interesting utterances she invariably produces once the camera has been turned off. My wife's native tongue is Dutch, mine is French and we live in an English environment. We follow the rule of one person-one language. I only address her in French, my wife in Dutch, and her friends and neighbours speak English with her. My wife and I usually communicate in Dutch, which makes it the dominant language within the family. Working in an Evening College allows me to spend my mornings with Livia. From the age of 5 months to 2 1/2, she went every afternoon to a Pakistani child-minder who spoke English and Urdu with the children. We were a bit concerned that the

¹ 4 years and 10 months.



introduction of a fourth language might be too much for Livia but this fear turned out to be unfounded. At 2 1/2 she started at a local English nursery school, which provides an extra stimulation for her development. She learns to draw, sing, dance, and she even gets two hours a week of formal instruction in French. She speaks French, Dutch and English with her dolls and repeats the rhymes, songs and phrases heard at the nursery.

Parents are justly amazed when they observe their children's acquisition of their mother tongue. When the child acquires three to four languages simultaneously, and with such apparent ease, it is even more impressive.

Livia started producing her first words at the age of one year and two months (1;2). She had a good passive knowledge of about 150 French, Dutch, Urdu and English words by then (*i.e.* she reacted appropriately when asked to fetch or do something). Her first words in English (1;2) were, not surprisingly, produced at the child-minder's house. She pointed to a banana and said «bana », followed by « give ! »; later (1;3) she told another child to « sit down ». She also produced Urdu words like « billi » ('cat'), « bareesh » ('rain'). She never got past the one-word-utterance stage in Urdu but has a good passive knowledge. Her first French words were (1;3) « poupou » (target: bonbon, 'sweet'), « froid » ('cold'), « chaud » ('hot'), « pabi » (target: poubelle, 'bin'). She produced only the first syllable of Dutch words in that period: « scho » (target: schort, 'apron'), « wa » (target: water, 'water'), « mo » (target: mond, 'mouth'). The first multi-word utterances in French and Dutch appeared at 2;2, like, for example, in French: « Four machine est finie » ('oven machine is finished'), « Papa, Ia pa(r)ti » ('Daddy, Livia is gone'), « maman manger » ('Mummy eat'), « Ia content, papa contente ? » ('Livia happy, daddy happy ?'). The utterances became gradually complex like: « Je m'appelle Livia avec une barbe et dans mon jardin j'ai des petits abricots et haricots » ('my name is Livia with a beard and in my garden I have small apricots and beans') (2;11) and in Dutch: « p(l)eisters van Ia, voor mij aw aw » ('plaster from Livia, for me ouch ouch'), « papa TV aan het kijken ? » ('daddy looking television ?'), « Nu heb ik een groot bed en ik kan goed slapen en mama en papa kunnen nu rustig slapen » ('now I have a big bed and I can sleep well en mommy and daddy can sleep in peace') (2;11).

English was and still is the language used with the dolls and with friends: « Paddington sleep » (2;4), « We're gonna sleep now » (2;7), « I prepared the lunch and now you don't want to eat it ? » (3;0), « Why did you put down your jacket ? » (3;0), « Sorry nursery, those little babies are actually scared of the nursery, could you please leave them alone ? » (3; 11).

Mixed utterances usually involve two languages, sometimes French and Dutch: « Papa, papa, Ia bijna tombé » ('Daddy, daddy, Livia almost fallen') (2;2), « fermer deur sinon kou » ('close door otherwise cold') (2;2), sometimes English-Dutch « Ik jump eruit » ('I jump out of it') (2;5), sometimes English-French: « La maîtresse dit: Can I have something ? et alors je dis: honey ! » ('The teacher says: Can I have something ? and then I say: honey !') (3;3) and sometimes English-French-Dutch: « Mimi, what do you préfères, een boterham ? » ('Mimi, what do you prefer, a slice of bread ?') (2;10). She realised soon that objects and body parts are referred to with different words in different languages, as illustrated in the following conversation about my feet. She uses the English word first, then the French word, and finally the Dutch word (2;5): (L = Livia, D = Daddy)

L: Grands feet papa ! ('Big feet daddy')

D: Grands pieds ? ('Big feet ?')

L : Oui grands pieds. ('Yes big feet')

L: Voetje, non grands feet ('Small foot, not big feet') (*she points to her feet).

At one point, she used homonymy to translate expressions, with hilarious results: « thank you very much » became in Dutch « dank u voor de match » ('thank you for the match') (2;7).

Metalinguistic awareness came very early. The language of a person or a doll is a characteristic that is as important to her as the colour of the hair. Sitting in her bath with her mother duck she said: « Maman petit canard spreken Nederlands » ('Mother duck speak Dutch') (1;9).

After being corrected by my wife because she used a French word adapted morpho-phonologically to Dutch, she realised her mistake and said so:

L: « En de couteausen op tafel doen » ('and put the knives on the table').

Mommy: « De messen ! » ('the knives').

L: « Ah ja, couteaux is in het Frans » ('oh yeah, « knife » is in French') (2; 10).

Her code-switching is clearly linked to the person's identity and to concepts probably learned at the nursery school, as the following exchange shows:

Mommy: « Ga je papa roepen, het eten is klaar » ('Call daddy, food is ready').

L: « Ja maar ik ga het in een andere language zeggen OK ? » ('yes but I'm gonna say it in another language OK ?').

L: « Papa, tu viens manger ? » ('Daddy do you come to eat ?') (4; 1).

It can be a shock when a toddler starts correcting her parents' English. When my wife asked how her friend Katerine was, Livia answered (2;4): « non maman, Catherine » ('no mommy, Catherine' – with English « th »).

She also gets very annoyed when we join in with her for a song in English, we just can't get it right it seems. Her parents' English finds no mercy in her ears: « ton English n'est pas bon papa, tu es bête » ('your English is bad daddy, you're not very clever') (4;3).

Her utterances in the three languages are generally well formed, with relatively few grammatical errors. Transfer errors are relatively rare and the errors she makes are generally comparable to those made by monolingual children at the same age, like the omission of the personal pronoun in subject position in French: « veux pas ça ! » ('don't want this') (2;5), or errors with the past participle in Dutch « ik heb gedrinken » (target: « gedronken », 'I have drunk' (2;11), or an occasional third person « -s » for a first person verb form in English: « I wants something » (2;9).

Most of these errors disappeared by the time she turned four, although she does persist in occasionally using second or third person singular verb forms instead of first person: L: « je va faire ça » ('I'm gonna do it') (target: « vais ») (3;11). We correct her errors and she spontaneously repeats the correction. In some rare cases she resists, arguing that we didn't understand the context. On one such occasion she was singing « Frère Jacques », a song she had learned at home some time before, with a pronounced English accent. A bit

worried, I joined in singing with the French accent. She looked at me angrily and said « Non papa, je chante en anglais ! » ('no daddy, I'm singing in English') (4;0). It turned out that she had sung the song the previous day at nursery school during the « French class ».

This anecdotal evidence shows that a very young trilingual child can grasp concepts like language and use it appropriately according to the situation. Having been in contact with different languages since her birth, multilingualism is seen by Livia as the norm rather than the exception. She understood very soon that most of her friends, our neighbours and her child-minder did not understand Dutch and French but spoke English and other languages. English has become the default language when meeting an unknown child in London. The situation at home is different because of our ability to speak and understand the three languages. She now addresses us mostly in « our » language and she is very surprised when we occasionally violate this rule. Sometimes however, she extends her English dialogues with her dolls to us and expects us to « play act » in English. We try to resist this in order to preserve French and Dutch as the languages of home. The language situation becomes more complicated when an English-speaking friend comes to play at home. In that case Livia will address her requests to us in English, in order to include her friend in the interaction. We answer in English. She might add an aside in French or Dutch and then translate it in English for her friend. Anger is usually expressed in French or Dutch. When she is aware that another person knows her three languages, she often code-switches from one language to another. Here again her language choice is dictated by the situation. At nursery for example she uses French with another French-speaking girl, but only if no other children or adults are involved in the interaction. One could say that Livia has become an expert applied sociolinguist.

Research literature on the subject of bilingual first language acquisition generally confirms the findings about Livia. In a recent overview, Professor Fred Genesee stated that young infants « possess the requisite perceptual and memory capacities to lay foundations for dual language acquisition and that they begin this process very early in development » (in press, p. 23). There is no doubt in his mind that « infants exposed to two languages simultaneously form differentiated linguistic systems from the earliest stages of productive language use (*i.e.*, the one-word stage and probably earlier during babbling) and that their pattern and rate of language acquisition (at least in the domain of syntax) is comparable to that of monolinguals in most important respects » (*id.*). There is of course more cross-linguistic transfer and code-mixing in the speech of bilinguals but it remains quite restricted in space and time. Most importantly, « it reflects additional processing capacities that bilingual children possess that permit them to co-ordinate the grammars of their two languages during on-line production » (*id.*).

It is also crucial to remember that a bilingual is not the sum of two monolinguals. Comparing the competence of the bilingual in one language with that of a monolingual is unfair. Professor Colin Baker argues that a monolingual might possess a larger vocabulary in one language, but the bilingual has a huge advantage of being able to communicate with people from different language groups and cultures; this is definitely a social and economic advantage these days. He adds that code-switching should not be seen as an indication that the bilingual is unable to keep his/her languages apart but more as the manifestation, in certain circumstances, of an unique multicultural personality. Bilingualism seems moreover linked to « a more richly fed thinking engine » (2000, pp. 66-67). Bilingual children are better aware of the arbitrary nature of language, they have extra breadth of understanding, they are more efficient and

emphatic communicators and they are relatively more creative and more imaginative in their thinking (2000, p. 67).

I hope this testimony, and the brief reference to the research in this field, can be a reassurance for those who might harbour fears about the “dangers” of early multilingualism. Livia’s grammar and mental lexicon are not in disarray. Her cognitive development appears to be perfectly normal and she expresses herself with ease. If she doesn’t get the cookie she ordered in one language, she code-switches to the other, just to make sure we understand her request. Her idiosyncratic utterances are generally comparable to those of monolingual children.

As a father I feel moved by my daughter, and as a linguist I am constantly fascinated, sometimes to her annoyance, when I scribble another of her utterances on a scrap of paper, like this last one, when she sang to her doll: « I’m happy because it’s my birthday. I receive a dolly and you go in the sky and you find and you go. Een mooi chansontje ! » (... ‘a nice little song’) (2;10).

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*Note: This study is supported by a faculty research grant from Birkbeck College.

