

Three languages from birth  
(Dutch, French, English):  
Perspectives from the child, the  
father and the researcher

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# Amazing brain capacity of young infants

- Fred Genesee (2003): they “possess the requisite perceptual & memory capacities to lay foundations for dual language acquisition and they begin this process very early in development”
- “infants exposed to 2 languages simultaneously form differentiated linguistic systems from the earliest stages of productive language use (the one-word stage) & probably earlier during babbling, their pattern & rate of language acquisition (at least in the domain of syntax) is comparable to that of monolinguals

# Some literature on trilingual children



- Xiao-Lei Wang (2008) *Growing Up with Three Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters
- (2000) Trilingual first language acquisition: exploration of a linguistic miracle. *La Chouette*, 31, 77-86. Also at: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/lc/french/chouette.htm>
- Festman, J., Poarch, G. & Dewaele, J.-M. (2011) *Multilingual children from birth – how to raise, help, and enjoy them*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters

# First words in 4 languages

- English (1;2) child-minder's house, pointing to banana: "bana...give !"; (1;3) "sit down"
- Urdu (1;3) "billi" ('cat'), "bareesh" ('rain'). Never more than 1-word-utterances but good passive knowledge.
- French (1;3) "poupou" (target: bonbon, 'sweet'), "froid" ('cold'), "chaud" ('hot'), "pabi" (target: poubelle, 'bin').
- Dutch (1;3): "scho" (target: schort, 'apron'), "wa" (target: water, 'water'), "mo" (target: mond, 'mouth').

# First multi-word utterances in French

- (2;2) “Four machine est finie” (‘oven machine is finished’)
- “Papa, la pa(r)ti” (‘Daddy, Livia is gone’)
- “maman manger” (‘Mummy eat’)
- “la content, papa contente ?” (‘Livia happy, daddy happy ?’)
- “Je m’appelle Livia avec une barbe et dans mon jardin j’ai des petits abricots et haricots” (‘my name is L. with a beard & in my garden I have small apricots & beans’) (2;11)

# First multi-word utterances in Dutch

- (2;2) “p(l)eisters van la, voor mij aw aw” (‘plaster from Livia, for me ouch ouch’)
- (2;3) “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).

# First multi-word utterances in English

English for dolls & 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)

## Livia's mixed utterances (age 2-3) (relatively few)

- Typically 2 languages, (**French/Dutch**: “Papa, papa, la bijna tombé” (‘Daddy, daddy, Livia almost fallen’) (2;2), “fermer deur sinon kou” (‘close door otherwise cold’) (2;2),
- **English/Dutch** “Ik jump eruit” (‘I jump out of it’) (2;5),
- **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)
- **English-French-Dutch**: “Mimi, what do you préfères, een boterham ?” (‘Mimi, what do you prefer, a slice of bread ?’) (2;10).

# Same referent, different words

- She realised soon that objects & body parts are referred to with different words in different languages, as illustrated in the following conversation about feet. 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).

- Homonymy to translate expressions: “thank you very much” became in Dutch “dank u voor de match” (‘thank you for the match’) (2;7).
- CS to express global appreciation: “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).

# Metalinguistic awareness

- Sticking to monolingual language mode with monolinguals
- Sitting in bath with yellow mother duck: “Maman petit canard spreken Nederlands” (‘Mother duck speak Dutch’) (1;9)
- Correction by my wife for using French word adapted morpho-phonologically to Dutch:
- L: “En de couteausen op tafel doen” (‘and put the knives on the table’).
- Mum: “De messen !” (‘the knives’).
- L: “Ah ja, couteaux is in het Frans” (‘oh yeah, “knife” is in French’) (2; 10).

# One person, one language

Code-switching clearly linked to person's identity:

- Mum: "Ga je papa roepen, het eten is klaar" ('Call daddy, food is ready').
- L (3;3): "Ja maar ik ga het in een andere language zeggen OK ?" ('yes but I'm gonna say it in another language OK').

# What are you guys?

- ...asks a monolingual English friend
- Mum: We're Belgians!
- Livia (age 3): No! .... I'm London girl!

# Language is accent, not words

- Livia 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).
- She had sung the song the previous day at nursery school during the "French class".
- "ton English n'est pas bon papa, tu es bête" ('your English is bad daddy, you're not very clever') (4;3).

# Livia interviewed age 10

- My friends are amazed that I speak so many languages, they are a bit jealous too. When they hear my dad speak to me in French there are like “is that French? Oh!”; and “I wish my dad spoke French with me”; and “you’re so lucky, you speak three languages”. At my school 4 in every 5 children come from another country, although they mostly only speak one or two languages. Their parents are almost always from another country, and rarely get used to speaking English.

# Livia interviewed age 13

- I don't get why people make such a big deal of it. I speak three languages, but it only feels like I speak one. I don't feel any different from anyone else. I say whatever comes into my head at home, be it French, Dutch or English. Mostly I try to speak French to my dad and Dutch to my mum, but English is the easiest because it's what I hear the most, and it's the language I learned to read and write in. I do feel it helps me grasp some things faster than others in my English class, because there is usually a French or Dutch word similar to it.

# Livia interviewed age 13

- English is my favourite subject, and I am the top of the class for it – I don't think speaking more languages hinders me, it helps me. I can switch languages on and off like a light switch, but if someone says something to me in French at school, I immediately start speaking French back. As for my learning Spanish, it doesn't feel as if my head is cluttered, as I said before, it helps me. I really enjoy learning a new language.

# Degrees of “nativeness”

- Sounds native in her 3 languages (functions without a problem with young speakers of French and Dutch)
- English clearly dominant
- Some grammatical errors in French (subjunctive, tense agreement)
- Literacy: English > French > Dutch
- Outperforming English monolinguals (11+)