Language maintenance and loss in a population study of young Australian children[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Information about children's cultural and linguistic diversity and language acquisition patterns is important for the development of sustainable educational practices. While there is some knowledge about language maintenance and loss in adults and older children, there is limited information about young children. The first three waves of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), involving 4252 young children, were considered longitudinally over the first five years of life to identify patterns of language maintenance and loss among those who speak languages other than English. The most common languages other than English spoken by the children were Arabic, Vietnamese, Italian, Spanish, and Greek and 9.1% of all children were reported to use a language other than English at wave 1, 15.7% at wave 2, and 15.2% at wave 3. Overall, 91.5% of children maintained speaking a language other than English between wave 1 and wave 2, and 86.6% did so between wave 1 and wave 3. Children's patterns of language acquisition and loss over the first five years of life varied within and between language groups. For example, Arabic-speaking children tended to maintain Arabic throughout early childhood, whereas Italian-speaking children's use of Italian decreased over the first five years of life while use of English steadily increased. Environmental and personal factors such as parental language use, presence of a grandparent in the home, type of early childhood care, first- and second-generation immigrant status, and parental perception of support from the educational environment were related to language maintenance among non-English speaking children.

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1. Language maintenance and loss in young Australian children

Children's early years are a time of rapid language acquisition whether they are learning one, two, or multiple languages. To date, limited large-scale data have been presented to examine patterns of language acquisition, maintenance, and loss among multilingual children in English-dominant countries. The current paper explores the patterns of language learning (in home languages and in English) occurring both within individual children and various language groups. The influence of personal factors as well as the home and educational environments upon multilingual children's acquisition, maintenance, and loss of languages are also considered and discussed. The terms multilingualism and bilingualism are often used interchangeably (Crystal, 2003); however, in this paper, multilingualism is used synonymously with bilingualism and encompasses those who speak two or more languages. Multilingualism is parallel with the term multiculturalism recognizing the breadth of cultural and linguistic influences within society.

1.1. Benefits of multilingualism

There are many known benefits to multilingualism, both cognitively and socially. A meta-analysis of the relationship between multilingualism and cognitive outcomes, undertaken by Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider (2010), found that multilingualism was associated with cognitive benefits including: increased abstract and symbolic representation skills, attention, working memory, and metalinguistic awareness. A number of other studies have found that multilingual children exhibit higher performance on executive functioning tasks (Bialystok, 2011; Gathercole et al., 2010), mathematical thinking (McLeod, Walker, Whiteford, & Harrison, 2013), and generally have greater metacognitive and metalinguistic capabilities. While multilingual children may acquire speech differently from monolingual children (Paradis, Genesee,

& Crago, 2011), there is no evidence that being multilingual, per se, has a negative impact upon speech acquisition (Hambly, Wren, McLeod, & Roulstone, 2013), particularly when the language input the child receives in each language is rich and frequent (Hammer, Lawrence, Rodriguez, Davison, & Miccio, 2011). Multilingualism also has a number of social benefits as it enables children to communicate with members of their home community who may not speak the dominant language of the broader social environment (such as grandparents) and facilitates increased cohesion among immigrant families (Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002) and communities (Ward & Hewstone, 1985).

1.2. Multilingual language acquisition

There are a number of circumstances in which children may be, or become, multilingual. These circumstances, as defined by Paradis et al. (2011), may involve two types of settings: a majority ethnolinguistic community (where the language being learned by the child is the dominant language of the community) and a minority ethnolinguistic community (in which a child belongs to a language-minority group within the larger community). In each of these communities, two different types of language acquisition patterns may occur: simultaneous or sequential language acquisition. Additionally, the phenomenon of subtractive multilingualism may be occurring in each of these settings. These patterns of language acquisition and loss are detailed below.

1.2.1. Simultaneous multilingualism

To be considered a simultaneous language learner, children would be exposed to two or more languages regularly from birth or soon after birth. Some authors (De Houwer, 1995; Paradis et al., 2011) have suggested that for a language to be considered a first language, children should have begun learning it before they are three-years-old. By this age, children have developed a foundation for the grammatical and syntactic structure of a language, as well as an increasingly expansive vocabulary (Saville-Troike, 2006). There is also evidence to suggest a difference in the cognitive skills of simultaneous multilinguals that does not appear to be present when an additional language is acquired after three years of age (Paradis et al., 2011). An example of a simultaneous multilingual would be a child living in the United States whose mother spoke English and father spoke Arabic, who learned both languages from birth and was supported in the development of each of these languages within both an English majority ethnolinguistic community (e.g., the school environment) and an Arabic minority ethnolinguistic community (e.g., home and/or religious environment).

1.2.2. Sequential multilingualism

Sequential multilinguals are children who form solid foundations in the acquisition of a first language (also known as the home language) before learning additional languages. This often occurs when children are raised in a minority ethnolinguistic community where the home language is spoken to the children until the commencement of schooling, where subsequently the dominant language of the community is used. Children are generally accepted as being sequential multilinguals if the additional language learning commences after the first language has been established (Tabors, 1997). An example of a sequential multilingual would be a child living in Australia whose mother and father spoke Vietnamese and lived within an Australian-Vietnamese ethnolinguistic minority community (with limited exposure to English), who then acquired English upon commencing formal schooling at five years of age. As can be seen from these examples, it is often the case that simultaneous multilinguals acquire their languages in the home, whereas sequential multilinguals acquire their additional languages in an educational or community setting.

1.2.3. Subtractive multilingualism

Subtractive multilingualism refers to the loss of language(s) (usually the home language) as other language(s) (usually the dominant language of the community or educational setting) become more developed (Roberts, 1995). This subtraction can be due to a number of factors including greater exposure to the other language(s), opportunities to use other language(s), parents' and educators' attitudes/beliefs about languages (e.g., language status), and personal preference of the child or family. An example of subtractive multilingualism would be a child whose family migrated to a different country and upon being immersed in the dominant language of their new environment, ceased or significantly reduced speaking the home language.

1.3. Language acquisition, maintenance, and loss

Theories of multilingualism in early childhood generally fall into two categories; psycholinguistic theories, which focus on individual skills, motivation, and strategies for language learning, and sociolinguistic theories, which focus on language use in social contexts (Díaz & Harvey, 2002). The current paper has adopted a sociolinguistic approach to consider the influence of social, and environmental factors that impact language use, maintenance, and loss in young multilingual children. Sociolinguistic theories draw upon sociocultural perspectives of language and learning such as those developed by Vygotsky (1986) to provide "a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language" (Holmes, 1992, p. 16). This perspective views language acquisition as a function of children's interactions in social spheres with different interlocutors in the home and broader community. Within this sociocultural interactionist perspective of language acquisition, the amount of linguistic input, interaction style, context of language exposure, and conversational partners that children engage with will determine their acquisition of language(s) (Chapman, 2000). These factors and their impact upon language acquisition, maintenance, and loss among children living in an English-dominant context have been explored in relation to the literature below.

In English-speaking countries, children from multilingual families are often exposed to a number of languages. Languages used with children may be different between home, social, and educational environments. Children may be exposed to and acquire all languages in the home simultaneously. Alternatively, they may acquire a new language upon commencing school if the language of instruction in their educational environment is different from the language(s) used at home. Upon learning a new language, children may maintain using their home language, resulting in them becoming multilingual, or they may experience a language shift to the dominant language and cease speaking the home language, resulting in language loss. The factors influencing each of these patterns as well as the social and educational consequences are discussed below.

1.3.1. Language acquisition

In order to become multilingual, children must receive sufficient exposure to, and support for, all of the languages they are learning (Patterson & Pearson, 2004). The home environment plays an important role in providing children's early models of language (Lyon, 1996; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). The languages that children are exposed to and acquire in the home will depend on the family language policy. The family language policy is defined as explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members (Schiffman, 1996; Shohamy, 2006).