

Code-switching in French-Russian simultaneous bilingual acquisition (2;1 to 4;0)

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Introduction

Recent research on bilingual acquisition has shown that young bilinguals have different paths in the development of two distinct languages. At two-words stage some young bilinguals start to produce unilingual sentences in their both languages (De Houwer, 1990; Sinka & Schelleter, 1998; Deuchar & Muntz, 2003, etc.), while others use mixed utterances and simple syntactic structures in their weaker language (Schlyter, 1995; Lanza 1997; Deuchar & Quay, 2000; Serratrice, 2002; Jisa, 2000; Juan-Garau & Pérez-Vidal, 2000; Müller & Kupisch, 2003; Comeau *et al.*, 2007). Since bilingual children are exposed to two languages, they may receive less total exposure to each of their languages than monolingual children. Thus, unbalanced input may result in unbalanced proficiency, e.g. one language developing faster or slower than the other one (Lanza, 1997; Döpke, 1998; King & Fogle, 2013). The societal language can sometimes influence the weaker one and the child would use more mixed utterances in his/her heritage language on the level of vocabulary (content and function words, Deprez, 1994; Jisa, 2000), morphology (grammatical morphemes) and syntax (Schlyter, 1993; Quay, 2008).

Methodology

This study focuses on language acquisition of a bilingual child growing up in a French-Russian speaking family (French-speaking father and a Russian-speaking mother) and hears these two languages from her birth. The couple applies 'one parent - one language' principle. The child lives in France and has developed dominance in the societal language.

The child has been recorded during spontaneous and natural interaction with both of her parents for the period of two years (from 2;00 to 4;00). The corpora consist of 68 hours recordings and of 28 hours of transcriptions. The data was collected on weekly basis during dyadic and triadic natural 'parent - child' conversations in different contexts: picture-book reading, guided activity and a free play.

Results

The findings have shown a shift from dominant bilingualism to the harmonious use of both languages at the age of 3. At this age, the acquisition of Russian grammatical categories was characterised by a rapid growth. The shift from dominant bilingualism to the harmonious use of both languages was accompanied by the changes of the child's linguistic soundscape, the use of parental discourse strategies and input frequency in Russian.

Unilingual French and mixed utterances are frequent in the child's speech in 'mother-child' conversation from 2;1 to 2;11. Russian utterances were produced either as maternal-speech imitations or as response to her discourse strategies which aimed to question the child's knowledge of Russian (e.g. *requests to translate or to give a Russian equivalent of a French word*). In these 'dilingual conversations', Russian content words were more frequent in mixed utterances and function words appear in low proportions.

From 2;5 to 2;9, a progressive increase of Russian content words and a slow but stable expansion of function words were observed. At this age, the child produced a large proportion of mixed utterances within 'mother-child' interactions. By this age, mixed content and function words receive Russian-case markings (**Accusative**: ex. "*cherche rybku Camille*" = *ishet rybku Kamiy* (Camille is looking for a fish), "*a pour menia*" = *eto dlia menia* (It's for me); **Dative**: ex. "*kukle merci*" = *kukle spasibo* (Thank you to the doll), **Genitive**: ex. "*ça y est tshaya*" = *bolshe net tshaya*, *There's no more tee*). Before these ages, Russian mixed elements were not inflected ("*a plein i yabloko*" - *mnogo yablok*, at 2;3 (There's a lot of apples). Thus, the bilingual child is sensitive to the morphological complexity of these distant languages

(French and Russian) and, despite low rates of Russian-unilingual utterances, the morphological aspects of Russian are being categorised.

From 3;0 to 4;0, a sudden switch to Russian language in 'mother-child' conversations was noted along with a rapid growth of grammatical categories in this language. This is accompanied by an important decrease of mixed utterances. At these ages, cross-linguistic transfers on the level of morphology and syntax in Russian-unilingual sentences appear. The child relies on the analytic features of French in the acquisition of synthetic aspects of Russian. Among these cross-linguistic influences, the child uses the Prepositional Case instead of the Instrumental Noun Case, double use of Subject Noun and Pronoun, Imperfective Aspects of the Verb instead of the Perfective Verbs, which are formed by inflexions or by a new verb stem, transfers of French productive verbs such as *faire* (to do), *mettre* (to put) instead of Russian specific action verbs, Plural marking of Collective Nouns.

The present study contributes to the comprehension of the acquisition process of two distinct grammatical systems by a bilingual child who hears these languages from birth. We also support the idea that bilingual children are sensitive to grammatical complexity of both languages from early ages and develop a common underlying proficiency, expressed in implicit metalinguistic knowledge that they apply in the acquisition of distinct grammars (Cummins, 1980).

Keywords: Bilingual simultaneous acquisition, French-Russian bilingual child, code-switching.

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