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Between-Language Competition in Early-Learner Bilinguals

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Abstract: In this article, an overview of the current state of the problem of plastic changes in the brain in connection with learning a foreign language is presented. A connection is made between language learning and bilingualism, a widespread phenomenon in the modern world. Recent research indicates that learning and using additional languages has a direct impact on a person's overall cognitive functioning, the mechanisms of which are little known. In this regard, one of the pressing neurobiological problems of our time is the mechanisms of interaction of languages in the bilingual brain and their influence on speech and non-speech functions of the brain. Despite the large amount of experimental material on this problem, the data remains contradictory and many authors question the existence of such an advantage. A possible reason for the discrepancies is the great heterogeneity of bilinguals as a group. The importance of studies of cognitive control in bilinguals using various groups of bi- and multilingual subjects is emphasized.

Keywords: bilinguals, direct impact, bilingualism, experimental material, cognitive functioning, language competition, early-learner.

Bilingualism exists as a term and as a word in everyday language. Among naive ideas about bilingualism, there is a widespread belief that only people whose parents are native speakers of different languages are considered bilingual, while the criterion for the level of proficiency in these languages remains secondary.

There is no reason to say that the human brain is focused on mastering only one native language. Among the numerous examples of bilingualism in different cultures, there are also such as linguistic exogamy, i.e. requirement to marry a partner from a community speaking a different language.

Bilingual infants face the challenge of recognizing and separating languages, even if they are raised on a “one adult, one language” basis, speaking to them in “Mom” and “Dad” languages. After all, the baby initially does not know which differences in the speech of adults are determined by their individual characteristics (gender, manner of speaking, predominant emotional background, etc.), and which ones are determined by the fact that they speak different languages. Some time ago, it was believed that bilingual children consider all addresses to them to be a single language, and distinguish two languages only when they more or less master their syntax and accumulate a certain vocabulary. But the babies were surprisingly competent at distinguishing between languages, even though Mommy's and Daddy's languages do influence each other.

It appears that bilingual children use different native/non-native discrimination strategies than monolingual children. A study of the speed of orientation in languages in infants showed that children who have one native language respond faster to it. Children with whom adults communicated in two languages (Spanish and Catalan) responded faster to a language unknown to them (English) (Bosch L., Sebastia'n-Galle's N., 1997).

The key characteristic of language that allows it to stand out in speech is rhythm. Conventionally, all languages can be divided into tonic (English, German, Russian), in which stressed vowels are pronounced clearly, and unstressed ones are reduced, and syllabic (French, Spanish), in which all syllables are pronounced with the same duration, as well as having double vowels (mora -timed), for

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example, Japanese. Newborns discriminate between languages from different rhythmic classes, but cannot discriminate between languages belonging to the same rhythmic class (Christophe & Morton, 1998, Nazzi, T. et al., 1998). However, sensitivity to languages develops quickly. Already by 4-5 months, children with whom they speak the same language distinguish their native language from a foreign language of the same rhythmic class, although they still cannot do this for two unknown languages. This suggests that distinguishing languages with similar rhythms requires more complex processes than simply choosing between familiar and unfamiliar.

Linguists note a moderate correlation between the rhythmic organization of a language and its syntax. For example, tonic languages mostly use subject-predicate-object word order, while syllabic languages tend to use subject-object-predicate order. Thus, mastering rhythm makes it easier for young children to master syntax (Nespor M. et al., 1996) and helps not to confuse the grammatical structure of two languages.

The baby receives a large amount of linguistic information visually, observing mouth movements, its rhythm and other facial expressions (Munhall K.G., Vatikiotis Bateson E., 1998; Soto-Faraco S. et al.; 2007). In the Sebastia'n-Galle laboratory, it was found that 4-month-old infants distinguish between languages of different rhythmic types (English and French) by examining the face of an experimenter silently articulating phrases in these languages.

Few studies have focused on how infants distinguish and master the phonetic structure of two languages at once. Studies of infants learning Spanish and Catalan have shown that they mix vowel sounds from different categories at 8 months, although they are successful in discrimination earlier (at 4 months) and later (at 12 months) (Bosch L., Sebastia´ n-Galle´s N., 2003). Studies of infants from English- and French-speaking families have also shown a consolidation of vowels from different languages that occurs between 10 and 12 months and resolves by the end of this period (Burns T.C. et al., 2003).

J. Paradis (2001) conducted research with children aged 2.5 years (30 months) who simultaneously mastered English and French. The use of nonsense words in the experiment showed that in the context of English phrases they confidently pronounce them according to the rules of English phonetics, and in the context of French phrases - accordingly, French ones.

Typically, vocabulary in young children is assessed using parenting questionnaires, the best known of which is the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Inventories, which has been adapted for many languages. For bilingual children, two versions of the questionnaire are usually used. This approach showed a fairly high degree of reliability when comparing data from questionnaires and observations of verbal communication between a child and an adult. However, for monolingual children, the number of words and the number of ideas or objects they are able to name are the same. Bilingual children very early begin to understand and use crosslanguage synonyms, i.e. denote the same objects with words from different languages, so the volumes of their lexical and conceptual vocabularies do not coincide (Pearson B.Z. et al., 1993).

Study of neural organization in children 19-22 months old speaking one and two languages (English and Spanish) Conboy B.T. & Mills D.L. (2006) showed similar EEG responses to familiar words from the two languages. At the same time, the electrical potentials evoked by words from the primary (dominant) and second languages differed in waveform and reaction time. This was the first study to address the problem of how two different languages are processed and differentiated within a single nervous system.

Language pairs. Each pair of languages poses a unique learning challenge for the child, because languages can be similar or, on the contrary, very different in phonetics, syntax and other characteristics. Pairs of languages may also differ in modality - for example, a child speaks one language at home, and speaks and learns to write another at school (Petitto L.A. et al., 2001).

Context of linguistic communication. Some children interact with many bilingual adults; with other children, parents adopt a "one person, one language" strategy; the differences in these approaches are not yet well understood.

Social status of the language. The two languages a child masters may have different statuses. Children usually become proficient in the language spoken by the community in which they live, but a minority language may subsequently be forgotten.

The relationship between language acquisition and socioeconomic status. In many regions, children from families with a special socioeconomic status (emigrants, refugees) turn out to be bilingual, in contrast to families where everyone speaks the same language. There is a possibility of attributing strengths and weaknesses to bilingualism that children actually owe to social conditions (Morton J.B., Harper, S.N., 2007; Gonzalez V., 2005).

Dominant language. Most bilingual adults identify one dominant language in which they perform better on a range of language tasks [68,69]. In infants, one language can also dominate, but it is extremely difficult to record this, especially at the stage of pre-linguistic development. This is usually considered to be language. In which the baby is most often addressed (usually maternal) (Bosch L., Sebastia'n-Galle's N., 1997). When a child begins to speak, the average duration of the utterance (Yip V., Matthews S., 2006) and the number of understood/pronounced words in a particular language are taken as the unit of measurement.

Age of language acquisition. Although this review focuses primarily on children who are bilingual from infancy, many children acquire two languages in some order, with age of acquisition of the second language being directly related to age of acquisition. Adults who learned both languages simultaneously from birth perform better on a range of language tasks than those who learned them alternately, even if the second language was added before age 3 (Navarra J. et al., 2005)

Currently, the field of bilingualism research consists of questions rather than answers. How are two native languages represented at the level of nervous organization and at the level of consciousness of the child? Are they organized in the same way? What is the contribution of the separation of languages and the interaction between them on a child's speech development? How do ideas about bilingualism relate to fundamental theories of language acquisition? Can the data obtained from experiments with bilingual children be transferred to children who communicate in more than two languages, and where, from a neuropsychological point of view, lies the limit of multilingualism?

The speech development of a bilingual child has its own characteristics. On average, such children begin to speak later. The most commonly described situation is when one parent speaks one language and the other speaks another. It is believed that early bilingualism, if the principle of "one language, one person" is observed, should develop outwardly relatively well, which in practice does not always turn out to be true. But this situation is not symmetrical: since the mother is usually with the child more often than the father, the mother's language will most likely dominate. If the family does not adhere to the principle of "one person, one language," then children cannot identify the principle of using words in both languages. Some bilingual children develop a stutter (in a very small percentage of cases, usually in combination with some other developmental factor).

The vocabulary in each language is usually smaller than that of monolingual peers, but the sum of vocabularies is larger than theirs. The ideas behind the concepts in each language are different. For example, objects that mom uses have names in her language, and dad's ones have names in dad's language. Accordingly, with a doll given by mom's friend, you will have to speak in mom's language, but in the room where dad works, only in dad's language. Children become upset if established principles are violated.

Some children, with insufficient access to the target language, do not acquire some grammatical phenomena. For example, if only the mother speaks one of the languages with the child, then for a long time he will not use verb endings or interjections characteristic of male speech. An only child who grows up among adults who speak a language that does not coincide with the language of the

environment will think that children do not speak his language. It happens that a child understands speech addressed to him in one of the languages, but always responds in another.

Many bilingual children go through a stage in their development when a word from one language "attaches" to a word from another language. An example of such a pair from the speech of a child learning French and English at the same time: car-auto, meaning a car in his language. In general, a child's strategies for mixing languages can be different: either the endings of another language are added to the roots of one language, or with normal grammar there is no correct pronunciation, or the child chooses all words from both languages, where, say, the stress falls on the second syllable or there are fewer sounds. Many errors are caused by the structural features of the two languages, and the child cannot avoid them.

Other types of behavior are associated with the psychological characteristics of the development of a bilingual child. For example, a child stops responding to parents in one of the languages, although he understands speech addressed to him. Or the child refuses to speak with strangers in one of the languages. Many children themselves advocate the separation of languages and forbid adults to mix languages or speak each other's languages. A child can identify himself with an adult of the same sex and speak, respectively, in the language of "men" or in the language of "women". Sometimes a child decides to try to speak with all strangers in one of the languages; or chooses interlocutors based on some external characteristics (hair color, clothing). These strategies usually work for a short period of time and change with age. Thus, children 3-4 years old distinguish who speaks what language, and are able to hear by ear the features of the speaker's pronunciation that distinguish his speech. 4-5 year old bilinguals know from experience what language the game should be organized in and intuitively correctly choose what to say in what situation. Children of senior preschool age ask questions that indicate the development of their metalinguistic abilities: they compare linguistic phenomena, identify the general and the special, talk about who speaks what language and where. As a rule, they are also interested in what other languages there are in the world, and they declare that they want to learn them.

The bilingualism of the first child in the family is somewhat different from the bilingualism of the second child. The first children, as is well known, generally master their native language faster. In most cases, adults pay more attention to first children. They hear more speech. The development of the speech of the second child in the family is influenced not only by the speech of adults, but also by the not yet fully formed bilingualism of the older sister or brother. The second child generalizes not only the linguistic phenomena that he hears in the speech of adults, but also the mistakes made by his sister or brother. If he wants to be like his older sister or brother, he will try to behave the same way as them, i.e. play in the language in which the older children in the family play with their peers. And since this is usually the language of the environment, younger children automatically receive more of the dominant (dominant in the environment) language than older children. But this situation can also change: becoming independent, the younger child chooses his own line of behavior and shows his own character. He begins to understand that in his family bilingualism is the norm and takes as a model not individual manifestations of speech ability, but its entirety.

In bilingual children, the two languages are sometimes at ontogenetically different stages of development. This happens, for example, if a child seems to get stuck in his knowledge of one of the languages at a lower level, when the learning conditions change (moving to another school, parental divorce, moving to a different language environment). The first crisis in speech acquisition occurs at the age of 6 or during the transition to school, when the authority of the teacher and the language of school instruction begin to play a significant role, and speech receives a written form. The second crisis occurs at the age of 12-14, when the realization of one's independence occurs, and the teenager decides what is more important to him in life at the moment. And the third crisis is when entering independent adult life, when professional interests begin to determine language priorities. At each of these moments, the individual's internal attitude towards his bilingualism may change.

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