

# Child Language Acquisition Monolingual vs. Bilingual: A Theoretical Analysis

Niruba Sarath Jayasundara

Senior lecturer in Linguistics, Department of Languages and Communication Studies  
Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University Sri Lanka, PhD Research Scholar  
Centre of Advanced Study in Linguistics, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India

**Abstract-** The present study discusses about the monolingual and bilingual child language acquisition on theoretical concern and the varied language acquisition processes which reflect in the language competence of both monolingual and bilingual child. It provides a detailed account of the different terminologies exist in literature of child language acquisition, particularizing the notion of Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG). It links and differentiates the study of language acquisition of monolingual children from the bilingual in light of four important criteria. Finally the papers suggest/points out as a concluding note how the study of child bilingualism could make a significant contribution in the area of language acquisition research.

**Index Terms—** Language Acquisition, Language Development, Bilingual Acquisition, Monolingual Child, Bilingual Child, Universal Grammar

## I. CHILD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

**Acquisition** as a technical term in linguistics means the natural imbibing of language in its cultural setting the language acquisition faculty is a typically human capacity, unique to human being. It is species specific. Acquisition of language takes place automatically, children imbibing the language of the community in which they grow up without any conscious effort. Parents eager to hear their child speak often try to teach them but, even without any such coaching, a normal child (i.e., a child without any speech defect) will acquire the language of the environment to which she / he is exposed.

Language is not genetically transmitted, but acquired from the environment. Therefore, an English child growing up in Japan will acquire Japanese and a Japanese child growing up in England will acquire English with equal easiness. No language is more or less difficult than any other language for such acquisition i.e., first language in its natural setting. It is an absolutely unconscious process like breathing and a natural part of the process of growing up. Just as the child learns to sit, stand or walk the child also learns to comprehend and produce utterances, i.e. to use language.

In spite of the fact that language is a highly complex and structured system comprising several systems, children acquire it fair swiftly and with amazing easiness. This naturally captured the attention of researchers. Linguists and Psychologists became equally interested in this area and in the 1950's the discipline **psycholinguistics** emerged out of their collaborative work. The study of "**language acquisition**" is the most important area and the principal concern of psycholinguistics. It forms a separate field of psycholinguistics known as "**Development Psycholinguistics**" which studies how language is acquired during the development of a child.

First language or mother tongue acquisition is also called "**Child language acquisition**" (Crystal 1985:5) or simply

"**Child Language**" (Ingram 1975:220) or **Child's language** (Clark & Clark 1977)

Sometimes, a distinction is made between "**Language acquisition**" and "**Language Development**". According to Crystal (1985:5) language acquisition refers to the "**Learning a linguistic rule**" i.e., the rule of grammar, phonology or semantics, and language development implies the "**Further use of this rule in an increasingly wide range of linguistic and social situations.**"

## II. BILINGUAL CHILD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Bilingual child language acquisition generally refers to acquiring two or more language when exposed to them as a very young child. Children growing up exposed to two or more languages acquire each of them in much the same way as monolinguals. Bilingual Acquisition during childhood can thus be regarded as an instance of simultaneous of two 'first' languages. In fact, if children are exposed to more than two languages simultaneously, they are able to acquire competence of each that does not substantially differ from the speaking ability of monolinguals. Bilingualism is therefore a special case of multilingualism.

## III. TERMINOLOGY FOR EARLY CHILD BILINGUALS

Researchers of child bilingualism use different terminologies. When children hear two languages from birth, Meisel (1989) has called this **bilingual first language acquisition**. De Houwer (2005) also uses this terms stating that she applies it to studies of children under the age of six who were exposed to two languages from birth and who continued to hear these languages fairly regularly up until the time of a reported study. Other researchers studying early bilingualism use the term **bilingual child language acquisition** for the object of their study to distinguish it from acquisition of only one language, which is simply called child language acquisition. All these acquisition researchers avoid calling either language the L<sub>1</sub> because, in effect, **both languages** are the child's **first language**. Many of the researchers set very stringent time limits of what should count as bilingual acquisition. De Houwer (1990) proposed that bilingual acquisition means the child is exposed to language B no later than a week after exposure to language A, and exposure is fairly regular on a daily basis. Whether all researchers follow this sharp division, most do refer to acquisition before age three as **simultaneous acquisition**. And of course one researcher's definition of a bilingual may not be same as that of another. The mysteries related to the terminologies researchers employ do exist.

#### IV. INTRODUCING CHILD BILINGUALISM

There are many questions that most people have about what is involved when very young children speak two or more languages. These questions revolve around two schemes the first theme concerns **differentiating the two languages**. (Is it possible for the child to speak both languages well but keep them separate? When these child bilinguals speak, do they just speak whatever, comes out first, or do they mix languages, or what?)

The second theme concerns the **age of acquisition**. (Is there a cutoff point in languages acquisition so that second language learning is more difficult after a certain age? i.e. what kind of support is there for a **critical age hypothesis**, the proposal that after a certain age, second language learning cannot be done with the same ease as it can for very young children).

#### V. DOING WHAT IS NATURAL: ACQUIRING LANGUAGE

Many who come from largely monolingual societies look upon very young children who speak two or more languages as linguistic marvels. We sometimes think such children must be super intelligent to “master” speaking two languages before they can ride a bicycle or tie their shoes. But these like bilinguals are not linguistic wizards; they are simply doing what children of normal intelligence can do. That is, they acquire the language varieties to which they are exposed.

All normal children come with a genetic program that predisposes them to acquire human languages. Exactly what this program includes remains controversial; It is part of the general “**nature – nurture**” debate as to how much language development is dependent upon **cognitive pre-programming** specifically designed for building a language. Those who favour “nature” refer to the role of Universal Grammar (UG) the notion of Chomsky (1965 ; 1981) a part of an innate faculty that makes any type of language acquisition possible; the role of UG is to **provide limits** on which structures are possible in human languages and which are not.

One of the most prominent researchers on UG in second language acquisition Lydia white, (2003) defines UG in this way ; “UG constitutes the child’s initial state (So), the knowledge that the child is equipped with is advance of input” (2003)

The contrasting view (the “nurture view”) is that language development is the product of general learning mechanisms. The idea is that humans with exposure to a language in use can use this general mechanism to develop language through analogical thinking and other forms of associations.

No matter which side one takes, evidence supports the assumption that some sort of innate faculty underlies language acquisition. This evidence is the finding that children all over the world go through similar stages when they acquire the grammatical systems of their specific languages. If we didn’t have an innate faculty that figures in language acquisition, it would be hard to explain the similarities that are found around the world in these steps in acquiring different languages. (Also, both children who end up as monolinguals and those who are early bilinguals go through similar stages of acquisition) De Houwer (2005) Genesee (2003).

#### VI. EXPOSURE TO LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT

Children need actual **exposure to a language in use** (by other humans) in order to develop a linguistic system (i.e. a

language). How important the extent and quality of exposure is remains a question but clearly exposure is vital.

Evidence does show that whatever language(s) children are exposed to be acquired. Acquisition is largely complete by the age of three or four for normal children; this depends somewhat on the complexity of grammatical elements in the language. Further all children monolinguals or bilinguals – acquire language apparently effortlessly that is they do so without overt instructions.

#### VII. SOCIAL MOTIVATIONS CAN MATTER

From the socio cultural stand point the process of acquiring two languages, may well be different from acquiring only one language. For one thing although every child of normal intelligence will acquire one language, children may resist acquiring some additional languages. How much the family and community support acquiring certain languages does matter.

Children a little older may have acquired two languages but one of them may then later fall into disuse unless there are domains in the community where the language can be used outside the home. So just because children are around speakers of a second language does not always mean they will really acquire it - especially if they have begun to speak another language that is more in use around them whose acquisition is more favored.

If we compare acquiring two languages as a small child with acquiring only one language, at least on the surface the **process of language acquisition itself seems no different** except that child bilinguals speak two instead of one. However, in many ways, this does not mean that a bilingual is a monolingual times two. There are differences in how a bilingual uses his or her two languages and possibly in how being bilingual affects thinking abstractly. Also, even though the left hemisphere of the brain is the site of language for both monolinguals and bilinguals, how the bilingual’s different languages are situated in that hemisphere seems to show variation across individual bilinguals.

#### VIII. WHAT / WHO IS A BILINGUAL CHILD

In distinguishing the study of monolingual children from that of bilingual children, the following four critical features of bilingual language acquisition, taken into account as necessary.

- a. The amount and type of input from each of the two languages.
- b. The possibility of an asymmetry or dominance of one language over the other.
- c. The interaction or separation of the two linguistic systems
- d. Socio-psychological factors in bilinguals acquisition and use.

##### a. Amount and Type of Input from Each Language

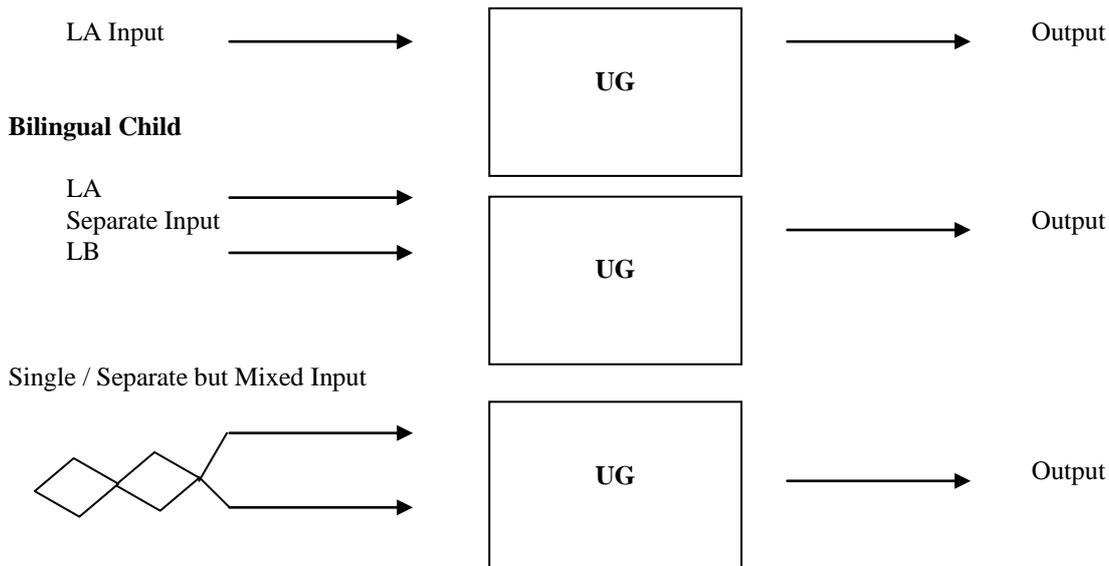
The primary linguistic data for a monolingual child consists is ambient linguistic evidence grounded in the grammar of a single language while two languages serve as the input source for a bilingual child. Hence, input in the case of a monolingual child is relatively uniform and homogeneous. Heterogeneity of linguistic input constitutes the defining feature of bilingual acquisition. Furthermore, the input to the bilingual children is always divided; so that the quantity of his or her exposure to each language is much smaller at any given time than that of

the monolingual child and in addition, the input from each language is intermittent with that from the other.

From the view point of input language, amount of input, input type, and temporal exposure, the bilingual child is not just a clone of two monolingual children. However, in spite of these differences, if these variables stay constant, early bilinguals are remarkably close to two monolinguals in terms of the development of formal features and mechanisms of language acquisition (i.e. in the development of phonology and syntax)

What is also noteworthy about the input source of the bilingual child is that it is either separate (two sources father speaking one language and mother another) or mixed (both mother and father and all other sources alternating between the two languages) Depending on the degree and manner of exposure to input from birth, each bilingual child represents a different point on that continuum, which gives rise to different results for the acquisition process in each child. The various input – related differences are shown diagrammatically in Figure 1.

**Monolingual Child**  
 Single Input



**Figure 1 Language Input Schema**

**The two Linguistic Systems in Bilingual Children**

During the past two decades the central issue in the field of bilingual language acquisition has been whether or not the bilingual children separate the two linguistic systems exemplified in their input during the initial stages of speech production. There is no doubt that eventually separation does take place with the result that the two systems become autonomous from each other. The question is whether, during the initial stages, bilinguals separate the two systems. The two main hypothesis that have attracted attention in research have been termed the **unitary hypothesis** (also called the single or initial one system hypothesis) and the **dual system hypothesis** (also called the independent development or autonomous hypothesis)

**b. Asymmetry / Dominance between the two systems**

Due to Socio – Psychological factors (some members of the society favoring one linguistic system over the other) or temporal and input relationships (lack of equal exposure) to the two languages from birth), one system invariably holds the upper hand over the other and in that sense an asymmetrical dominance relationship is found between the two participating linguistic systems. Consequently, one of the bilingual child’s languages becomes dominant though he or she is competent in both.

**c. Interaction and Separation of the Two Linguistic Systems**

Like any other bilingual, the bilingual child is not only capable of keeping the two linguistic systems separate once his or her grammatical competence reaches its ultimate point, but he or she can also employ these two systems interactively. The result is code mixing and code switching behavior on the part of bilinguals.

**d. Socio – Psychological Factors  
 Progression and Regression Phenomena**

Depending in the socio-psychological factors, the bilingual child may exhibit regression and progression of the two participating linguistic systems for example, in Leopold’s classic longitudinal case study (Leopold 1939-1949) when Hildegard was in Germany her English retreated to such an extent that she could use it only to count. However, the same child on her return to the United States revived her English without much struggle and later on her German beings to yield in favor of English. The accounts of other bilingual children show that, in the case of extreme culture shock, one system may be totally turned off.

**IX. CONCLUSION: WHY STUDY BILINGUAL CHILD**

Genesee (2001) offers a strong case for why child bilingualism is worth researcher’s attention. The most obvious practical reason is that the majority of the world’s population is bilingual and many of them acquired two languages simultaneously as young children. Thus, not to study their

linguistic profiles would be ignore an important part of the lives of many people. There are also clinical, reasons to study these bilinguals; ensuring the normal development of their languages and treating any pathological problems both deserve attention. Assessment methods and measures used by clinicians are still largely monolingual and monoculture. Therefore, the validity of these methods is questionable and basic research on the bilingual child should be expected to make significant contributions in this area.

The study of bilingual child can help to give certain methodological problems is areas of research that are currently more intensively pursued. There are theoretical reasons to study child bilingualism. To date, most theories of language development are based on what happens in monolingual children. Studies of the simultaneous acquisition of two languages can provide facts against which current theories of language acquisition should be tested.

Furthermore, careful consideration of the phenomena of bilingualism leads to a reexamination of notions such as that of “native speakers” that are currently applied in linguistic theory and child language research.

#### REFERENCES

[1] A De Houwer - 2009 Bilingual first language acquisition - Multilingual Matters

[2] Clark & Clark 1977: 422 CLARK, Herbert H. & Eve V. (1977) *Psychology and Language: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich. (PL)

[3] Crystal, David. 1985. *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*. 2nd edition. New York: Basil Blackwell.

[4] Genesee, F. (2001) Bilingual First Language Acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. 21. 153-68.

[5] Ingram, D. (1975). The acquisition of questions in normal and linguistically deviant children: a pilot study. In W. von Raffler Engel (Ed.) *Child Language: 1975*. Word, 27, 119-124.

[6] Meisel, J.M. (1989). Early differentiation of languages in bilingual children. In K. Hyltenstam & L. Obler (Eds). *Bilingualism across the lifespan: Aspects of acquisition, maturity, and loss (13-40)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[7] Noam Chomsky (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* Cambridge MA: MIT Press ISBN 978-0-262-53007-1

[8] Paradis, J., Crago, M., Genesee, F., & Rice, M. (2003). Bilingual children with specific language impairment: How do they compare with their monolingual peers? *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 46: 113-127.

[9] White, Lydia. 2003. *Second language acquisition and Universal Grammar*. Cambridge University Press ISBN: 9780521796477.