

**CAN THE PRINCIPLE OF 'ONE PERSON – ONE LANGUAGE' BE DISREGARDED
AS UNREALISTICALLY ELITIST?**

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ABSTRACT

Early accounts of the achievement of bilingualism in children of dual-language couples stressed the importance of clear language differentiation according to a principle called 'one person–one language'. This approach has come under attack recently as being elitist and atypical of bilinguals, and largely unrealistic. Proponents of these criticisms fail to see the benefits that knowledge of the factors which can make bilingualism succeed under these conditions can have for families in a diverse range of bilingual situations. The 'one person–one language' principle will be conceptualised as successful because it invokes principles of language maintenance relevant for bilingual societies on the level of individual families. This is seen as important in situations where societal support is minimal or non-existent.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood bilingualism continues to puzzle and intrigue. First it was considered too hard, later it was considered not to present any additional burden. Many children around the world are

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bilingual, but many parents who are in a position to choose for their children to become bilingual see their endeavour fail. We would like to know what it is that *makes* children acquire two languages simultaneously. Most successful with raising their children bilingually seem to be families who are surrounded by a close network of minority language speakers (Lyon 1996; Clyne 1970). Where this is not possible, parents have been advised to follow the 'one person–one language' principle. But recently there has been a wave of criticism against this approach.

In this paper the 'one person–one language' principle and the criticism against it will be reviewed. The analysis of the shortcomings of these criticisms will lead into a discussion of the sociolinguistic and developmental effects which the 'one person–one language' principle has on the acquisition of the minority language.

ACCOUNTS OF THE 'ONE PERSON–ONE LANGUAGE' PRINCIPLE

The 'one person–one language' principle entails that two (or more) languages are closely tied to particular people. Mostly a child's parents choose to each speak a different language to the child. This was first suggested to Ronjat by Grammont (Ronjat 1913). The expectation is that the child will associate each of the languages with a different person and, therefore, be able to develop both without much interference from the other. Following Ronjat's diary account of his son's bilingual development, there has been a series of investigations of infant bilingualism under 'one person–one language' conditions (Leopold 1939–49; Porsché 1983; Taeschner 1983; Kielhöfer & Jonekeit 1983; Hoffmann 1985; Saunders 1988; Kravin 1992). A common characteristic of these studies is that the authors were linguists observing their own children.

Non-linguist parents have also been reported to use the 'one person–one language' principle (Harding & Riley 1986; Arnberg 1981, 1987; Döpke 1992). An ever increasing number of such children are not being studied for the purpose of investigating the principle, but in order to find out more about formal aspects of the simultaneous acquisition of two languages.

Researchers use the 'one person–one language' principle as a guarantee that the children do indeed hear both languages regularly from birth (Bain & Yu 1980; de Houwer 1990; Schlyter 1993; Meisel ed. 1990; Hulk 1996; Paradis & Genesee 1996; Döpke 1997a, 1997b; Schelleter & Sinka 1997). From these studies, there is ample evidence that this principle *can* succeed with installing active competence in two languages in young children.

CRITICISM AGAINST THE 'ONE PERSON–ONE LANGUAGE' PRINCIPLE

Criticism has recently been expressed against the focus of research into childhood bilingualism being so much on the 'one person–one language' principle (Romaine 1995; Lyon 1996). The families who are described in the literature as using it are, if not linguists themselves, so at least from middle class background. As such the 'one person–one language' principle can be seen as a feature of bilingual development under elitist and therefore atypical family conditions. This appears inequitable to researchers who are concerned with social issues of bilingualism and the disadvantaged position in which many migrating families find themselves. Their social engagement demands that their research should benefit those most in need for support.

This criticism against the 'one person–one language' principle is in line with trends in other areas of linguistics and in education, in particular first language acquisition and literacy development, where criticism has been metered out against researchers presenting their findings from White middle class subjects as the norm. Maintaining a position of social engagement is clearly important for researchers, but, as I will argue, premature at our current level of understanding the parameters of success in childhood bilingualism.

Another aspect of the criticism against the 'one person–one language' principle is that it does not automatically guarantee success. Many of the accounts indicate that it is common for children only to achieve passive competence in the minority language (Søndergaard 1981; Arnberg 1981, 1987; Porsché 1983; Harding & Riley 1986; Billings 1990; Döpke 1992; Yamamoto 1995). Rather than being an argument against the continuation of research into 'one person–one

language' families this should beg the very interesting and ultimately manageable question of what the forces are within the nuclear family which produce very different outcomes under very similar sociolinguistic conditions.

Some scholars argue that code mixing and code switching is a natural aspect of the communication of bilinguals, and the fact that children continue to grow up to become competent bilinguals all over the world indicates that the 'one person–one language' principle is not a necessary prerequisite for a child's bilingual development (Romaine 1995; Lyon 1996). Goodz (1989) argued that even parents who strongly subscribe to the separation of languages by parent mix and switch between the languages. This was more recently corroborated by Nicholadis & Genesee (1998) and Lanza (1997). Lanza (1997) specifically looked at parents' reactions to children's mixing, an analytical parameter also present in Goodz (1989), and found that even parents who employ the 'one person–one language' principle differ according to whether they create a more monolingual context for their children's language acquisition, which actively discourages cross-language influences in the both the parent's and the child's output, or a more bilingual context. Bilingual contexts may range from using the bilinguality of the situation as a resource to freely mixing and switching. Thus, the principle of 'one person–one language' is seen by some as artificial and an unnecessary restriction of the natural interaction between people who speak more than one language.

The affluent socioeconomic situations of parents adopting the 'one person–one language' principle, its unpredictability with respect to children acquiring an active command of the minority language and the perceived unnaturalness of committing oneself to either using one language or the other are the major components of the criticism against it. In the next section I will address some of the assumptions of the various criticisms against the 'one person–one language' principle and examine their empirical basis. I will contrast that with the positive contribution which investigations of the conditions under which the 'one parent–one language' principle is successful can make to our understanding of successful childhood bilingualism in a range of demographic situations. The following section will discuss the reasons why the 'one

person–one language' principle has the potential of positively effecting the child's bilingual development even under linguistically impoverished conditions and how the findings from this area of investigation will benefit all types of bilingual communities concerned about the maintenance of their language.

SHORTCOMINGS OF THE CRITICISM

Increased education and increased mobility for reasons of employment is a reality of our times and affects a growing number of people. If such people live in linguistically exogamous relationships they have very real needs in terms of support and information, if they want to transmit a parent's minority language to their children. These people need support precisely *because* experience has shown that in spite of the fact that their socioeconomic situation is often above average their success with language maintenance is not automatically guaranteed, but is indeed highly varied (Arnberg 1987; Porsché 1983; Harding & Riley 1986; Billings 1990; Döpke 1992; Yamamoto 1995). Psychologically, dual–language families have as much need and, politically, they should have as much right to maintain their minority language as people who live in a minority language community. Practically, they have much less support for the minority language. With respect to their children's bilingual development these families are certainly not 'advantaged'. Such families need to know how an individual parent can manipulate the micro-level of interaction in order to generate a linguistic environment in which the minority language can flourish.

The argument against researchers focussing on the bilingual development in 'one person–one language' families is also a quantitative one: there are many more children growing up in bilingual communities than in demographically isolated bilingual families. While this is true, we need to take note of the fact that many children grow up monolingually in largely bilingual communities in spite of the expressed wishes of their parents that the children should become bilingual. This was evident in Lyon's (1996) study of a Welsh community. She found that only for those children whose both parents are Welsh speakers can the simultaneous development of

Welsh and English be predicted. That totally Welsh-speaking families are a good breeding ground for competently Welsh-speaking children is not surprising, but it is not a useful finding for families in linguistically less fortunate circumstances as this variable can usually not be manipulated.

Children from mixed language backgrounds developed only very limited active competence in Welsh, in Lyon's study. With respect to their parents' language choice, Lyon stated that "parents who are bilingual and who may live in a bilingual community have no rigid language rules, but mix languages and code switch" (Lyon 1996:39). She used this as an argument against the importance of the 'one person-one language' principle. On close inspection of Lyon's data one gets the impression that the exception to children from dual-language families not becoming competent Welsh speakers in the preschool years seemed to have been those whose parents *did* employ the 'one person-one language' principle with some degree of consistency (Döpke 1997c). Thus, even parents living in a bilingual community would benefit from more extensive and more detailed advice on micro-level features of the interaction.

A third type of parents who can benefit from research into parental features of interaction in situations of successful family bilingualism are those who share a minority language but live in a community where this language is not supported. Data from Australia indicate (Clyne 1982) that in such families the child does not automatically become or remain a competent speaker of the parents' minority language either. Micro-level features of the interaction between parents and children and particularly parents' consistency of language choice might well be at play here as well.

For the researcher, demographically displaced 'one parent-one language' families are a naturalistically occurring experimental group. They allow us to isolate parental language features as a cause for varying degrees of success in children's bilingual development. The more we know about micro-level features of the interaction between parent and child and their correlation with the successful acquisition of an otherwise unsupported minority language, the better we can

give parents practical advice on factors which they have the power to manipulate. Knowledge of causative factors in 'one parent–one language' families will also enhance our understanding of why children's bilingual development is more successful in some communities than in others as the macro-structures of language distribution and language use in a bilingual community are realised through micro-level interactions between people. Since the tracking of micro-level influences is much more difficult where complex language networks exist, research on the bilingual development in families who follow the 'one parent–one language' principle remains at the forefront of research into the successful acquisition of two languages in early childhood.

The argument that mixing and switching is a natural form of behaviour among bilinguals has so far not discredited the 'one parent–one language' principle. In fact, to do that one would need to show that mixed language input and clearly separated language input are equally likely to produce competent bilingual children in situations where a child's parent is more or less the only source for the minority language. Lanza (1997) contributes to this issues. She compared two American–Norwegian families in Norway who wanted their children to become bilingual. In both families the mothers spoke English to their children and the fathers spoke Norwegian. Siri's parents had explicitly adopted the 'one parent–one language' principle as a strategy for family interactions. Tomas' parents said they did not follow a rigid language rule. Nevertheless as a default of their language background the languages were predominantly differentiate by parent in Tomas' family as well. Thus both families are examples of 'one parent–one language' situations under very similar demographic conditions but with different strategies on the micro-level of interaction. Data was collected for a few months following the children's second birthdays. During that time Siri was able to express herself in both languages. Tomas, on the other hand, only spoke Norwegian with some English words thrown in.

Lanza's findings are supported by Billings (1990) and Yamamoto (1995). Billings (1990) surveyed English–Japanese parents in Japan regarding their language use practices at home and their perception of their children's abilities in English. She reported that over half of the children in families where parents followed the 'one parent–one language' principle were perceived by

their parents as active bilinguals, but only 20% of parents who reported not to follow a clear language separation rule thought that their children were able to do more than understand the minority language. Yamamoto (1995) found that only those children in 'one parent–one language' families became active users of the minority language whose minority language speaking parents *exclusively* used the minority language with their children. Thus, until proven otherwise, advice to parents along the lines that mixing is a natural form of bilingual interaction and whether or not parents mix and switch between languages is unlikely to be related to their children's attainment of competence in the minority language is just not sound.

Goodz (1989) claimed that she had empirical evidence that even parents who reportedly rigidly followed the 'one parent–one language' principle succumbed to natural mixing and switching and that these children did become active bilinguals in spite of their parents' not strictly adhering to the language separation rule. There are two points to be made in response to this finding. Firstly, the families studied by Goodz lived in Montreal, a thoroughly bilingual community with well-entrenched language separation practices. Secondly, on close inspection of the empirical evidence one finds that the parents in Goodz' study mix very little. Goodz' charts show that the parents' maximum amount of mixing in any one session is below 8 utterances in a thousand, that is, below 0.8% of their utterances diverge from the strict separation of the languages. I would think that this is very good evidence that these parents do adhere to the 'one parent–one language' principle strictly. In response to their child's mixing the maximum of parent mixing was somewhat higher with 30 in a thousand responses mixed. However, this is still only 3%. It is not clear whether parental mixing in response to the children's mixing is to be counted as part of the 0.8% of parental mixing or in addition. But even if we assume the latter, given that the children in the same session in which parents' mixes were highest only mixed in about 3.5% (charted as 35 in a thousand) of their own utterances to which 3% of parents' reactions were mixes, we are only dealing with an additional 0.1%. Thus, the absolute maximum of parental utterances not adhering to a strict separation between the languages is about 0.9 in a 100, in Goodz' study. This evidence *does not* lend itself to a conclusion that the 'one person–one language' principle is unimportant because mixing and switching is a natural behaviour and

parents cannot help but succumb to it. On the contrary, Goodz' study shows how well parents *are* able to abide by this principle.

When talking about switching and mixing and their likely effect on the children's acquisition of the minority language, it is important to consider at which points in the interaction switches occur. Lanza (1997:308) looked at the systematicity of codeswitching by Tomas' mother. She found that code switches occurred for instructions and to ensure that he understood in linguistically more demanding situations, for instance when recalling past events or when introducing a new topic¹. If that persists as a pattern, input in the minority language is limited to routines and where comprehension is assured because of the 'here and now' of the situation. Such input is bare of cognitively challenging and demanding language, which is characteristic of input changes in the majority language and a prerequisite for age-appropriate language development. Thus, the effect of mixed input on the children's acquisition of the minority language might be varied due to variations in the quality of parents' switches. More research into qualitative aspects of parental switching in relation to parents' proclaimed language strategies and the children's attainment of the minority language is clearly necessary.

In sum, criticisms of the 'one person–one language' principle are largely short sighted. In linguistic terms dual-language families are not advantaged, and bilingual communities do not guarantee success. Separating between languages or mixing and switching are habit based behaviours, and once the habit is formed, both feel natural to the bilingual speaker. Where parents are in a position to choose one or the other, advice that both strategies are equally likely to facilitate children's acquisition of active competence in the minority language is not supported

¹. The last of those is very interesting, and in fact suspicious: It begs the question of how much more Norwegian the mother spoke with her son when she was not taped, as otherwise she would have had little reason to assume he didn't understand her. Lanza felt that Tomas displayed comprehension of English, but the data indicate that his parents doubted that. In fact his signs of comprehension might have been an artefact of his young age, the closeness of the languages and the 'here and now' of the interaction typical with young children. This type of trap might be typical for parents who make choices similar to those of Tomas' parents. I have had discussions with people who were adamant that there dog understood everything they said!

by the available research. Families in all types of bilingual situations can be helped by more detailed information about micro-level conditions of the interaction between parents and children and their likely role in children's successful acquisition of the minority language. Demographically displaced dual-language families present a true advantage to the researcher wanting to differentiate between macro- and micro-level factors related to the successful transmission of a minority language to one's children.

WHAT CAN THE 'ONE PARENT–ONE LANGUAGE' PRINCIPLE DO FOR BILINGUAL FAMILIES?

There is agreement that the 'one person–one language' principle is not a sufficient condition for a child acquiring the minority language. I would like to argue that the 'one person–one language' principle is not actually a strategy, but a language choice framework. It provides a macro-structure, which needs to be realised through micro-structure moves. The various strategies which this framework promotes constitute a continuum between monolingual and bilingual (Lanza 1997). Many of the accounts of families employing the 'one person–one language' principle can be placed on this continuum. Of them, Ronjat, with his rigid approach, is an example of the 'one person–one language' principle at the most monolingual end of the continuum. Parents' language choice being distributed quantitatively according to 'one parent–one language' but exhibiting frequent mixes and switches is a realisation of the principle towards the very bilingual end of the continuum, an example of which are Tomas' parents (Lanza 1997). Most others are to be placed at various points on this continuum, with people who insist that their children use the minority language being placed further towards its monolingual end (Taeschner 1983; Saunders 1988; two of the parents in Döpke 1992; Siri's parents in Lanza 1997), and those who do not insist that their children use the minority language further towards its bilingual end (Porsché 1983; Kravin 1992; four of the parents in Döpke 1992). When comparing this with the degree of competence which the children achieved in the minority language, one cannot help but note that the further towards the bilingual end of the continuum parents' strategies are, the less likely the child is to develop an active command of the minority

language. Parents stating that they employ the 'one parent–one language' principle may find themselves anywhere on this continuum. If we do survey studies, we need to ensure that parents and researcher have similar concepts regarding the filling of the language choice framework with micro-level strategies, and that we do not assume the creation of a largely monolingual context for the minority language when in fact the parents created a bilingual context.

While the 'one parent–one language' principle is not a sufficient condition for the simultaneous development of two languages, in families where only one of the parents represents the minority language, it appears to be a necessary condition. In such families, the linguistic input is automatically impoverished by the fact that input is limited to mainly one person (Cross 1981). Frequent switches into the majority language further take away from the minority language input both in quantity and probably in quality (cf. types of switching of Tomas' mother in Lanza 1997). Thus, inconsistent language choices inadvertently contribute to the gap in children's competence, which usually develops between the minority language and the language of the country in which the families live.

Parents' examples of switching between languages cannot help but give permission for children to do the same. Choosing the dominant language when it is difficult to communicate an idea in the weaker language will not make the minority language any more accessible in this area the next time the need arises. It does nothing for the maintenance of active language skills in the minority language for bilinguals of any age. For young children it appears to stop the development short in its tracks unless some force other than the parent who represents the minority language in the family creates a need for the child to speak it.

Parents who do adhere to consistent language choice patterns create a clearly defined domain for the minority language. Fishman (1980) argued that in the absence of functional specification, the two languages compete and the minority language will gradually be given up. The monolingual realisation of the 'one person–one language' principle can be conceptualised as successful because it invokes principles of language maintenance relevant for bilingual societies on the level

of the individual family. This is important in situations where societal support is minimal or non-existent.

Language choice according to a clearly defined domain, ie. minority language use in interaction with the minority language parent, unrestricted by further functional specification, like topic or locality, is likely to create the richest and most varied input possible under the conditions. Firstly, consistent language choice on the side of the minority language speaking parent suppresses competition between the languages and affords the child the maximum quantity of exposure to the minority language that this parent is able to provide single-handedly. Secondly, unconditional use of the minority language will ensure that the child has the chance to experience the full range of parent–child interactions in the minority language. This will not only include routines and references to the immediate situation, but instructions and explanations, remote topic references and stories, information about the self and the world, discussions and fights, make-believe and hypotheses, books and games, and as the child grows older elements of school work like arithmetic or project organisation. A parent choosing to create a monolingual context for the use of the minority language will expose the child to the widest range of vocabulary and grammatical structures possible under the circumstances. Thirdly, under clear language choice conditions, the minority language input will naturally change from simple to increasingly complex because the parent will adjust his/her language to age–appropriate content and complexity. Lastly, but very importantly, the parent who expects the child to speak the minority language, will quickly detect areas of gaps between the minority language and the dominant language through the child's mixing. Parents who are sensitive to their children's language needs can exploit mixing in the child's output as a guide to necessary modifications in the input. This might be with respect to frequency of lexical items or grammatical structure, or call for new areas of content.

The 'one parent–one language' principle at the more rigid end of the monolingual–bilingual continuum is superior to less rigid language choice patterns. Most parents are not language teachers and not able to consciously monitor their language nor plan stimulating language

experiences for their children at certain times. To ensure a rich minority language context for the children it is easiest to advise parents with respect to their overall language choice decision. In addition, it is possible to suggest activities which have been shown to facilitate language development under monolingual conditions, like listening to the child and following her lead, playing with the child, and reading books with him. The parent who has made an unequivocal choice in favour of the minority language will automatically utilise such activities for the benefit of the development of the minority language.

I want to finish this section off by addressing a problem which parents who want to follow the 'one parent–one language' principle frequently have, namely how far their rigidity should go with respect to using the minority language beyond the home. There are three aspects to this: quantity of input, topics one talks about, and the people one talks with. As children grow older, parents spend progressively less time alone at home with their children. Thus, continuing to speak the minority language outside the home is a means to keeping the input up to the maximum quantity of what a single person can provide. This choice also opens up a wide range of content areas for minority language use, which would otherwise not be covered. With respect to the exposure to minority language speakers, Lyon (1996:43) rightly contended that "the child needs natural models in a variety of natural settings where the range of language use and linguistic styles can be observed and their social meaning understood." While socially delicate to decide in individual situations, parents who do choose to continue to speak the minority language with their children outside the home will be surprised by the opportunities for minority language use this decision generates because, at least in Australia, people who share the minority language often identify themselves to the parent–child dyad. This was reported by Saunders (1988), and has also been my experience. My own children must have a very inflated concept of how widely our home language is used here.

CONCLUSIONS

While it is true that childhood bilingualism most frequently arises in bilingual communities, forces in such communities are complex and isolating specific factors which facilitate the simultaneous acquisition of two languages is difficult. Studies of bilingual communities have usually shown that close networks of many speakers, and if possible some monolingual speakers among them, are best predictors of children acquiring active competence of a language. For demographically displaced dual-language families such findings are defeatist as these conditions are just not met for them and cannot be manipulated. However, the success that many of those families have with raising their children bilingually, coupled with the *lack* of success of many dual-language families in bilingual communities, suggests that micro-level factors of interaction might actually be more important than macro-level factors of the social composition of bilingual communities.

Parents choosing to transmit their own language to their children without the support of a community sharing that language might often be educationally and economically above average, but with respect to the linguistic situation their children find themselves in, they are not advantaged. The only advantage in that situation is to the researcher who wants to isolate the factors which lead to the successful acquisition of two languages, because this group presents a language acquisition situation in which a parent's effect on the children's language development is not confounded with the possible effect which a range of other people in the community might have.

The insights we can gain from further research of childhood bilingualism under demographically displaced 'one parent-one language' conditions reach far beyond this group. They have implications for shared-language families in the same situation and dual-language families in bilingual communities, both of which often face similar problems to the first group. Thorough knowledge and the possibility for sound advice, that can result from that, will make children's bilingualism in situations which have proven to be difficult for the simultaneous acquisition of two languages more achievable, even for families in socially and economically less fortunate conditions. Therefore, research into family-based bilingualism does not simply

support those who are advantaged already. In fact, it uses them. Experience has shown that they do not mind.

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