

BILINGUALISM – AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNICK DE HOUWER

Annick De Houwer
University of Antwerpen

ReVEL – During the process of language acquisition, does a bilingual child make the same kind of “linguistic errors” as a monolingual child does? Putting it another way, are the errors in bilingual acquisition due to interlingual interference? Or are they just common errors found in any monolingual child when acquiring their native language?

De Houwer – Before I respond specifically, I'd like to make clear that what I say in this interview applies to children up until, say, age 6.

To get to your first question: well, it all depends on WHEN the bilingual child started learning his or her two languages. A child growing up with two languages from birth will not generally make errors that show an influence from the other language (an occasional one is always possible, though). This finding has led me to propose the Separate Development Hypothesis (or SDH), which says that children who hear two languages from birth develop their two languages as two essentially distinct morphosyntactic systems (the SDH doesn't make any claims about phonology or lexicon). The kinds of clear errors that bilingual first language learners make in each of their languages closely resemble the errors made by monolingual children.

On the other hand, children who start learning a second language after they've been basically monolingual typically do show some interference from the language they learned first. There are huge differences between these young second language learners in the extent to which they show interference, and in the speed with which they learn not to make these interference errors. The particular interference errors made are quite different from the specific errors monolingual children make,

although of course in addition to the interference errors, second language learners may also make typically 'monolingual' errors.

ReVEL – How is the child’s cognitive apparatus equipped to deal with lexical items from two different languages?

De Houwer – We know as little about this for bilingual children as we know about it for monolingual ones. What we do know is that children growing up with two languages from birth have no problem with the fact that the same referent can have two different names, whereas some monolingual children have been found to have problems with within-language synonymy (that's what basically Eve Clark's Principle of Contrast and Ellen Markman's Exclusivity Principle refer to). But on the whole, as is also the case for monolingual children, we know much less about lexical development in bilingual children than about morphosyntactic development.

ReVEL - Are there any examples in the literature of children that acquired more than two languages at the same time? Is it possible for a child to acquire three or more languages at an early age?

De Houwer – Well, there is a book coming out any time now with *Multilingual Matters* by Julia Barnes that describes the language development of a child who grew up with English, Basque and Spanish from birth. Other studies of early trilingualism concern children who started out with two languages and then added a third in their second year.

In spite of the lack of systematic studies on early trilingual development, anecdotal evidence shows that it certainly is possible for young children to acquire three languages at a very early age. And in the older European literature on bilingualism there are a few reports of scholars who describe their own quadrilingual development.

I believe it is possible for children to acquire three or more languages at an early age, but I think it does not happen very often: I did a survey of home language use in over 18,000 families in Flanders, which is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and in that large sample there were only about 300 families where children grew up trilingually or quadrilingually, compared to close to 2,500 families with bilingual children.

ReVEL – What is the importance of input during the bilingual acquisition?

De Houwer – I'm convinced that frequency of input (combined, of course, with age-appropriate input, and warm responsiveness) are crucial in both a monolingual and a bilingual setting. However, I think that the role of the input is even much more important in a bilingual setting than in a 'normal' monolingual situation. The main reason is that in a monolingual setting, what you don't get from some persons in your environment, you'll learn from some others. The input situation, if you like, is less vulnerable. But in a bilingual setting it is possible that only one person is the 'carrier' of a particular language. If that person doesn't talk much to the child, the child will have much less of a chance to acquire that language. People often forget that children don't just learn from the air. In learning to talk, children need to hear a lot of language, and they need to be given the opportunity to speak a lot. This takes a lot of time and effort, both in monolingual and bilingual settings. Usually if people see problems with a bilingual situation, it's not the fact that there's been input in two languages that's the real problem, but the fact that there's been insufficient input in these two languages (or in one of them). Unfortunately, many parents are not aware of this. Often, people move their young children around a lot and don't consider the bad effects of drastic changes in linguistic environments. That can be very bad for children's linguistic development, and that in turn, negatively affects their social and educational development. Children need consistent and frequent input in all the languages they need to learn.

ReVEL – As an expert in the field, what books can you suggest for Linguistics students who want to know more about Bilingualism?

De Houwer – I still think that Suzanne Romaine's 1995 book is the very best introduction to the field. Li Wei has edited a Reader that's also very good. And for the more advanced students there is the recently published Handbook of Bilingualism that focuses on Psycholinguistic approaches. The International Journal of Bilingualism is I think the best source for up to date work on a wide range of topics in bilingualism.

References

Kroll, J. & A. De Groot, eds., 2005. *Handbook of Bilingualism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Li Wei, ed., 2000. *The Bilingualism Reader*. London: Routledge.

Romaine, S. 1995. *Bilingualism* (2nd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.