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Series Editor: David Singleton, *Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland*

Early Trilingualism

A Focus on Questions

Julia D. Barnes

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Introduction

Interest in child language acquisition has a long history. Herodotus (circa 485–425BC) reports on an experiment by King Psammetchos, who left two infants in the care of shepherd with orders not to speak to them until they uttered their first word, which was allegedly *bekos*, the word for bread in the Phrygian language. Further experiments of this type were reportedly carried out by Frederick of Hohenstaufen (1194–1250), Charles IV of France (1294–1328), James IV of Scotland (1473–1513) and the Mogul Emperor Akbar Khan (1542–1605). More scientific studies have been carried out by linguists, psychologists and biologists who have kept diary records of their children’s language development. However, investigators were confined by lack of technology until the early 1960s, when the field was revolutionised by the coming of the tape recorder.

The tape recorder enabled researchers, such as Brown (1968, 1973) and his team, to collect language samples from individuals and groups of children that are still used to this day both longitudinally and cross-sectionally. The samples were transcribed by hand and mimeographed for distribution to other colleagues. Technical improvements coincided with new theories about universals and creative hypothesis testing (Chomsky, 1957, 1965), which further motivated efforts in child language research. Technological developments in computers during the 1980s led to the design of systems for the storage and analysis of child language corpora – such as SALT (Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts) (Miller & Chapman, 1985) and CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) (MacWhinney, 1991) – and research into child language acquisition has gone from strength to strength.

Research into the bilingual and trilingual acquisition of language has a somewhat shorter history since few studies were carried out until the late 1970s. The most notable of the early studies are those of Ronjat (1913) on his French/German bilingual son and of Leopold (1939–1949/1970) on his English/German bilingual daughter.

In 1978 Volterra and Taeschner published a study on two Italian/German bilingual girls in which it was claimed that initially the two languages formed one system before eventually becoming differentiated. This issue dominated research in the field of bilingualism throughout the

1980s and into the 1990s as researchers sought evidence of either single or differentiated systems in bilingual subjects (De Houwer, 1990, 1995; Genesee, 1989; Meisel, 1989). It coincided with a realisation that cases of bilingual acquisition were not uncommon and that the study of these cases could provide insights into language not found in monolingual research. Nowadays research into bilingual acquisition is a flourishing field, largely focused on how cross-linguistic evidence can contribute to understanding of the language acquisition process (Slobin, 1985, 1997).

It may be that much of what has been learned about bilingualism also applies to trilingualism but, in the absence of studies on trilingualism to back up such claims (Hoffmann, 2001; Hoffmann & Widdicombe, 1999), this is speculation. Since Murrell (1966), there have been only a dozen or so descriptive reports and studies specifically related to the simultaneous acquisition of three or more languages that can shed light on this process. Very recently there has been some growth in studies on the acquisition of a third language (usually English), in relation to educational contexts, as English and multilingualism have become increasingly important as a result of globalisation (Byram & Leman, 1989; Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; Cenoz *et al.*, 2001). However, as yet there is little published work on the increasing number of children who are growing up multilingual at home as a result of increased mobility between countries and more mixed marriages, let alone studies of the children of communities that have been multilingual for centuries in Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

The present book should go some way toward broadening our limited knowledge of trilingualism, by reducing the gap in studies on children in whom three languages are developing simultaneously. It examines the case of Jenny, a child in the Basque Country in Spain, who has been brought up with three languages (English, Basque and Spanish) from birth. The book looks at her general development in English, but more specifically examines the acquisition of questions in English from both a formal and functional perspective. These areas have received considerable interest in the past in monolingual studies but they have not been widely examined recently, nor from a bilingual and trilingual perspective.

In order to understand trilingualism we need to imagine what is going on inside a brain where the three systems co-exist. In the view of Cook (1995: 94) 'a single mind with more than one language has a totality that is very different from a mind with a single language' and Cook terms the language capacities of such a mind 'multi-competence'. The languages in a multi-competent individual may develop as separate systems, but the commonalities between them cannot be overlooked, and Cook suggests that such minds may have a flexible grammar rather than the single fixed

grammar suggested by the Universal Grammar approach to language acquisition (Cook, 1995: 96). Multilingual individuals should not therefore be seen as having two (or three) first languages added together but rather as the owners of their personal multi-competent knowledge, which is not measurable in terms of monolingual standards (Hoffmann, 1991).

The present study begins from the theoretical standpoint of the autonomous development hypothesis (Meisel, 2001) that the child is developing her languages in separate systems. These systems will be 'highly similar' to those of monolinguals (De Houwer, 1995: 244) yet we should beware of seeing a bilingual child as two monolinguals, or a trilingual child as three monolinguals or even three bilinguals (Cook, 1992; Grosjean, 1989). It is simply a case of not comparing like with like. If a trilingual child is viewed holistically in terms of being a multi-competent user as described by Cook (1992, 1995, 1996), s/he is clearly more proficient than a monolingual or bilingual as s/he is processing three languages rather than one or two. However, if three languages are co-existing in close contact it is to be expected that there will be some cross-linguistic influence. Evidence of cross-linguistic influence provides the investigator with insights into the relationship between the three languages in the child's mind. Likewise, comparison with development in other monolingual, bilingual and trilingual subjects helps to see the similarities and differences that exist (De Houwer, 1995).

When we began recording the subject of our study, Jenny, at the age of one year and eleven months, she was making good progress in all three of her languages. However, for a number of reasons we decided to study only her English. Firstly, Jenny had never been to England and her knowledge of English had been acquired solely through her family (mother, siblings and visits from relations) and through exposure to media (books, television and videos). Her contact with English is therefore different from that found in other English studies and makes her case somewhat remarkable as it shows that it is possible to learn a language even if input is limited to the home context. Secondly, of the three languages, English is the one to which Jenny is not exposed in the community, and so its study provides an insight into how a language may be acquired, albeit in special conditions, with a minority language parent.

Furthermore, English is of interest since it is a world language and the language most widely found in multilingual contexts. As a result it is also among the most widely reported languages in the literature on monolingual and bilingual acquisition, and so there are plenty of other studies available in English with which to draw comparisons in relation to bilingualism, trilingualism and the development of form and function in questions. By

comparing Jenny's language development in English with that of other children, we may learn more about acquisition in general and trilingualism in particular. However, we should not overlook the fact that our view of Jenny's development must necessarily be holistic since English, a Germanic language, is only one of three very different languages that the child is acquiring. Spanish is a Romance language, whilst Basque is a non-Indo-European language that is unrelated to any other language family.

Questions were used by Socrates (469–399BC) to guide his discussions, and they have been widely studied for their powerful role in language and in thought. A review of the literature in the field of child language acquisition suggested that it was time to re-visit the subject of children's acquisition of questions in English; previous studies on form and pragmatics in questions laid the foundations for the present study of the acquisition of questions within a new context, that of trilingualism.

The study of questions is particularly interesting because questions can be analysed as units at both a formal and a pragmatic level. The development of linguistic form is related to the child's development of thought and desire for knowledge; a child asks because s/he wants to know. Questions are easily identified because of their 'distinct grammatical form' (Dore, 1977: 145), yet at the same time they are complex because they are able to incorporate all the elements present in the grammar and lexicon of a language. Questions are a good point from which to observe language development since they constitute a relatively limited area in which progress can really be followed. As Labov and Labov point out in their study of questions:

The notion that children learn syntactic regularities with great ease and rapidity does not find support in (the) data ... The problem then is not to ask, how does the child learn this syntactic rule so quickly, but rather: why does it take so long and so many trials? (Labov & Labov, 1978: 7)

The fact that questions are formulated in other ways in Basque and Spanish highlights the variation that exists between Jenny's three languages, and makes her ability to acquire three systems all the more interesting. It also helps us to identify when there is cross-linguistic influence at a syntactic level.

Questions are also a rich field in which to find evidence of pragmatic development, since their use is closely connected with language function. A child may ask a question in order to obtain real information about the world; s/he may equally use a question, the answer to which s/he already knows, to initiate or maintain a conversation. Likewise, a question form may be used pragmatically to request an object or service, to ask permission

or to seek clarification. Furthermore, use of requests has been shown to be an area in which inter-linguistic transfer at a pragmatic level can take place (Blum-Kulka, 1991) and where influence from Jenny's other two languages might be expected.

Lastly, the study of questions is particularly suitable as a specific area through which to examine the English of a trilingual child interacting with her mother. Tyack and Ingram (1977: 214) have noted that 'children probably direct more questions to a parent than to an intermittent outside visitor' and Przetacznik-Gierowska and Ligeza (1990) consider that parent-child questioning interactions fulfil an important role in the development of socio-communicative skills. Therefore methodological considerations relating to the use of a case study for longitudinal studies of child language development led us to choose interrogative behaviour as a focus for our work. This choice also permits us to study the development of Jenny's communicative competence in relation to a specific area (Hymes 1972).

The aim of the study is to examine whether the child is developing her English and interrogative behaviour in a way that is similar to other monolingual and bilingual subjects even though in her case it is a third language. Where her development differs from that of other monolingual children, we posit that this must be the result of either idiosyncratic development or cross-linguistic influence. By explaining those areas that are related to cross-linguistic influence, we learn more about bilingual and trilingual acquisition.

The study also analyses the correspondence between the child's questioning behaviour and that of her mother, in relation to the use of form, function and the feedback that is given to questions. In this way, the research addresses real communication since it examines not only linguistic competence but also communicative competence and sociolinguistic competence. The question and feedback data are initially classified according to function and speaker, hence it is from a pragmatic perspective that we carry out the subsequent analysis of question form.

The description of the theoretical background to the investigation, its implementation and its findings are organised as follows. Part 1 deals with theoretical perspectives. Chapter 1 reviews the literature relating to the study of bilingual and trilingual acquisition. Chapter 2 describes the development of interrogative behaviour according to the literature available on the following: question form, the comprehension of questions and input, pragmatic aspects of question requests, interaction and the acquisition of questions in bilinguals, and question form in Basque and Spanish.

The second part of the book deals with the study itself. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used in the study and the five research issues on

which it is based. Chapter 4 begins by describing Jenny's general development in English, then outlines her acquisition of question form during the period under study before going on to discuss pragmatic development and to examine Jenny's use of question functions and relate this to her communicative competence. It also describes the functions of her mother's questions and examines the feedback of both the mother and child before dealing with cross-linguistic influence at a lexical level in Jenny's English in general and at a syntactic level in her questions. Chapter 5 offers an interpretation of the findings in relation to each of the research issues together with some conclusions and future perspectives for further research

Part 1

Theoretical Perspectives