

Factors governing code mixing in early bilingual acquisition: Dominance, language modes, and discourse strategies

One of the main questions that arises in cases where children code switch or code mix often in their early production is whether mixing can be considered a sign of confusion, of competency, or of neither. Earlier research on language mixing in bilingual first language acquisition often pointed to the idea of a “unitary language system” (Genesee 1989), with code mixing being considered a sign of confusion. More recent and systematic research contradicts the claim of the hypothesis, however. More recently, researchers have proposed that bilingual children use code mixing as a way to fill lexical gaps where translation equivalents are not yet present (Yow, Patricia, and Flynn 2014, Genesee 2008). Genesee (2008) notes that the most common form of code mixing in children involves using a word from one language while speaking another language. In other words, code mixing in child language most commonly looks a lot like lexical borrowing, while using syntactic structures from one language while speaking the other is less common.

This study examines the code mixing of a bilingual girl, Hedda, growing up in Norway and acquiring Norwegian and English from birth. Hedda’s father is American and consistently speaks English with her, while Hedda’s Norwegian mother consistently addresses her in Norwegian. The parents speak Norwegian with each other. Thus, although her father is a consistent and ample source of English input, Norwegian is clearly the dominant language in Hedda’s surroundings. We use corpus data collected between the ages of 2;3-3;3 to examine Hedda’s mixing habits when conversing with native speakers of both Norwegian and English in order to compare her code mixing habits in each language. Our data show that Hedda code mixes extensively when communicating with English speakers, while code mixing is almost absent in Norwegian contexts. Examples of typical language mixing utterances are illustrated in (1)-(3) (Norwegian items in bold face). Hedda’s mastery of English lags behind her Norwegian competence (the latter is comparable to that of her monolingual Norwegian peers). However, it is interesting to note that either when prompted, or when in appropriate contexts, she is able to produce fairly complex English sentence structures, as shown in (4-5). Based on this, we examine possible contributing factors to account for Hedda’s code mixing patterns.

François Grosjean has written extensively on the importance of language modes when conducting research on bi- and multilingualism, particularly with regard to language acquisition. For bilinguals he conceptualizes a continuum with a fully monolingual mode at one end and a fully bilingual mode at the other, where a mode describes a state of activation for each of the bilingual’s languages (Grosjean 1998). In other words, depending on the context and who the bilingual is speaking to, each language will be at a corresponding level of activation or deactivation. Interacting with a monolingual speaker of Language A will mean Language A is activated for the bilingual. Language B, the bilingual’s other language which the interlocutor does not speak, will be less activated. These levels of activation can vary based on many different variables, and there is considerable variation among bilingual speakers as well, particularly when it comes to levels of dominance. Grosjean (2008) notes that in cases where bilinguals are highly dominant in one of their languages, deactivating the dominant language can be difficult even in situations where the speaker starts out in a monolingual mode with an interlocutor who only speaks the weaker language. We suggest that this plays a large role in Hedda’s code mixing patterns. Norwegian is clearly her dominant language. Moreover, her day-to-day life rarely brings her into contact with monolingual English contexts, making a monolingual English mode a rare occurrence for her. Thus, the dominance of Norwegian in both Hedda’s competence and general surroundings prohibits deactivation of this language, even in English modes.

- (1) **den store gravemaskinen** digge up rocks. (Hedda 2;6)
the big excavator.the dig.NORW-pres.infl up rocks
 ‘The big excavator is digging up rocks.’
- (2) pappa, **du må** brushe **mine** teeth. (Hedda 3;2)
papa you must brush.NORW-inf.infl my teeth
 ‘Papa, you have to brush my teeth.’
- (3) **æ** feede **dem** apples (Hedda 3;2)
I feed.NORW-pres.infl them apples
 ‘I’m feeding them apples.’
- (4) Hedda: **æ vil ikke i vogna.** (Hedda 3;2)
I want not in stroller.the
 ‘I don’t want to go in the stroller.’
 Mother: **kan du si det på engelsk?**
can you say that in English
 ‘Can you say that in English?’
 Hedda: I don’t want in stroller.
- (5) I’m a fox so I can **hjelp** you (Hedda 3;2)
I’m a fox so I can help you

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