

Book Review

Bilingual Children: A Guide for Parents

by Jürgen M. Meisel

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As the father of a child who is growing up in a home where Japanese and English are used, any guidance on matters of language development that comes my way is deeply appreciated. So, it was with great enthusiasm that I began to read *Bilingual Children: A Guide for Parents* by Jürgen M. Meisel (henceforth, JMM). In the field of second language acquisition, JMM is widely known for his research on developmental sequences and the ZISA project¹. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Hamburg and Adjunct Professor and Distinguished Fellow at the University of Calgary, as well as founding editor of the journal, *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* (Cambridge). On top of these stellar credentials, he has worked in parent counseling for over three decades.

The book opens with a preface. Here, JMM clarifies that the intended audience is parents and caregivers of children in bilingual family settings. The topics raised in the book pertain to language development up until age five or six. The areas covered are based on counseling experience and research evidence. Details of the chapter organization and JMM's professional background are also provided.

Chapter 1 begins by sketching various attitudes toward early bilingual acquisition, from the view that “monolingualism is curable” (p. 1) to the possible risks and benefits of bilingualism. It then orients readers to the focus on language and its development. The distinction between *competence* (or, knowledge of a language's properties) and *performance* (use of it to communicate with other speakers) is important to understanding this book, which is largely concerned with the development of native competences in two languages. The book's goal is to guide informed decisions during the pre-school years, while bearing in mind an assortment of practical concerns, such as age of acquisition, variation in the rate of learning, and quantity versus quality of language input. Like all chapters, this one ends with suggestions for additional reading.

Chapter 2 explores the question of how infants become native speakers. Three typical characteristics of first language acquisition are attributed to a Language Making Capacity comprised of general and specific endowments, including Universal Grammar. These three characteristics are: (1) invariable success despite varying conditions, (2) completion within a relatively short timespan (three to four years) and (3) uniform developmental sequences. Then, milestones in first language comprehension and

¹ ZISA stands for *Zweitspracherwerb italienischer (portugiesischer) und spanischer Arbeiter*, or Second Language Acquisition by Italian (Portuguese) and Spanish Workers (see Meisel, 2011).

production (from birth to 24 months) are described. The question is whether bilingual development also exhibits the three aforementioned properties. The answer given is that it does; simultaneous bilingualism in childhood is dual first language development.

Chapter 3 tackles the issue of whether children are confused by learning two languages. Differentiation refers to the child's ability to distinguish between languages. The evidence is strongly in favor of differentiation from an early age. So, when bilingual children mix languages this does not mean that they have fused their two languages into one system. Instead, a thorough review of studies on lexis, syntax, and morphology supports the existence of dual systems. This chapter also presents questions from parents, as do subsequent ones. It concludes by discussing the one person, one language (OPOLO) method, which JMM recommends, while encouraging flexibility.

Chapter 4 builds on the previous one by addressing the topic of interaction between languages during development. It is noted that other languages cannot be "shut off" but remain partially activated in the bilingual brain. From this viewpoint, language choice and code-switching are seen as social practices that bilinguals learn through experience. It is therefore not surprising if a child's bilingual behavior differs from an adult's in this regard. Gradually, children acquire the competence to use both languages in a mature way. Simultaneous activation of languages also raises concerns that bilingual children will differ from their monolingual peers in their rate of development or in the grammatical constructions they use. JMM reviews the evidence and concludes any dissimilarities in rate of acquisition or use of constructions by some children are not qualitative, but quantitative differences. Parents' use of language mixing, as a common feature of bilingual communication in families, is then discussed in terms of the discourse strategies that adults use with children. JMM advises parents to adopt subtle approaches to prompting the desired language rather than feigning a lack of comprehension when children use the "wrong" language.

Chapter 5 confronts the challenge of children refusing to speak one of their family languages, which occurs in one in four cases, according to JMM. The reasons for this are considered and three concepts are presented which help to explain it: dominance, strength, and preferences. For instance, bilinguals in this country experience Japanese as the dominant language of society and may have weaker versus stronger languages, as well as preferences about using their languages. A crucial factor is the behavior of those in the child's home environment. Thus, JMM urges parents not to give up when faced with this situation. In the case of unbalanced bilingualism, research suggests that acquisition can still proceed in the weaker language. The chapter concludes with practical suggestions about what to do (and what not to do) in order to strengthen a weaker language. One recommendation that stands out is to initially use OPOLO followed by a later increase in

the use of the minority language at home.

Chapter 6 offers insight into trilingual development. The parents whose inquiries drive this chapter relate intriguing scenarios of children exposed to between three and five languages. JMM reports that acquiring four first languages is indeed possible (p. 186). A central issue, however, is to ensure access to a sufficient quantity and quality of input in each. The details of this are worth reading even for those who are mainly interested in *bilingualism*. As for the amount of input, the minimum threshold for acquisition would presumably also apply when dealing with two languages. Regarding its quality, the discussion concerns the range of speakers a child interacts with (more is better, including peers) and whether these interlocutors must be native speakers (they need not be). Advice for coping with multilingual acquisition rounds out this chapter.

Chapter 7 considers age, or specifically the age of onset of acquisition. The focus shifts here from simultaneous to successive acquisition of two languages during childhood. Based on research by JMM, it is shown that German-speaking children exposed to French from age four make grammatical errors that resemble those of adult L2 learners of French. This is dubbed child L2 acquisition. In discussing the critical period hypothesis, it is noted that for various language domains (e.g., morphosyntax, phonology) there is an optimal or sensitive period followed by a gradual offset, which is compared to a slowly closing door. This is why it is difficult to establish any specific age limits; however, JMM contends that native competence requires exposure between birth and approximately four years, with continued access to the language to allow for the stability of this competence (p. 212). Having said this, it is also noted that children of any age may fare better than adults. Some advice on managing successive bilingualism is provided.

Chapter 8 opens with a review reassuring parents who aim to provide opportunities for bilingual development that their children will not be disadvantaged in comparison to monolingual children. It turns then to consideration of recent research on the cognitive advantages of bilingualism. As JMM acknowledges, this is a controversial topic that is hard to draw firm conclusions about due to contrasting findings. Bilingualism sometimes appears to enhance executive function or to delay cognitive impairment among elderly individuals, but it is not the only route to such benefits nor should such claims take precedence over the main reasons to promote bilingualism. The primary reasons include providing children with the ability to live bilingual and bicultural lives. The book concludes with further recommendations to support these aims.

The prose is clear and eloquent in each of these chapters, which contain useful boxes that reinforce key concepts, sum up the evidence, and present parental questions. Figures are also used to illustrate ideas throughout the book. JMM presents

engaging questions and offers comprehensive answers to them, often providing an assessment of whether the issues are settled or not. There is a consistent thread of using established facts to draw conclusions that overturn objections or allay concerns. Careful reasoning is also applied to various cases described by parents and JMM's recommendations take into further account the particular details of each family situation. This effortless blend of expository, descriptive, and persuasive writing enhances the reading experience. When they arise, technical terms (e.g., clitics) are explained and abbreviations (which are listed in the front of the book) are used sparingly. The author mostly steers clear of jargon, using it only when necessary for a deeper understanding of the issues. In-text citations are used infrequently, which is appropriate considering that the audience is a general one (the bibliography lists primary and other sources). Overall, it is an elegant presentation of highly complex issues.

Potential readers are likely to wonder about the range of languages considered in this book. As noted, a sizable portion of most of the chapters is based on questions from parents of children growing up in bilingual settings. In these discussions, German is often one of the two (or more) languages. Other featured languages include (in alphabetical order): Arabic, Armenian, Basque, Croatian, Dutch, English, Farsi, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Kurdish, Luxemburgish, Norwegian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish, Swiss-German and Turkish. Their degree of satisfaction with this selection is for individual readers to decide. However, it is entirely understandable given JMM's background. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are also mentioned in the text. Moreover, the final reading suggestion offered in the book is one that deals with Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese, and English (Kato, 2003). Personally, while I certainly would have welcomed more coverage of English-Japanese bilingualism, it was easy to relate to most of the concerns raised by parents and hard not to be impressed by JMM's engagement with a wide variety of languages.

While seeking to foster bilingualism during childhood is a laudable and quite reasonable goal, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for each family. This book is an invaluable resource for those wishing to understand scientific evidence and practical choices that will help them to support bilingual children. It is therefore highly recommended reading for parents and caregivers of young bi- or multicultural individuals.

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