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Japanese-Korean bilingual development from birth: A case study

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I. Introduction

In this research note, I report some preliminary results on the observations of a child's bilingual (Japanese-Korean) development. The purpose of this study to provide empirical evidence to early childhood bilingual development, especially in the area of external speech, prosody, and symbolic gesturing. The research concludes with a suggestion for future research directions, proposing non-verbal elements as key area of investigation in early childhood bilingual development.

This research note is motivated by a highly personal matter—my encounter with the staff at the health community center as mother. I have one daughter named Yuna, who was born in 2020 and turns to two in October. In accordance with the law, I was informed that the city was going to monitor and probe the child's language and cognitive development around 18 months. The staff said several questions in response to the questionnaire I filled in and see if there were any noticeable delays or differences in the child's behavior. Everything went smoothly until she showed a laminated paper on which there were several animals (cat, dog, and lion) and objects, such as flower and car. She said in Japanese, “Bubuwa nani?” “nyanya wa nani?”, asking Yuna to point out the right pictures.

I knew that my daughter would fail the test. Since her birth, I never called car *bubu*, or cat *nyanya* in front of her. As a non-native Japanese speaker, I was not familiar with child-directed languages in Japanese and even did not know what *bubu* meant for. Besides, Yuna did not seem to be happy with the fact that the stranger kept trying to attract her attention. I was ushered to the next room as she kept crying without showing any intention to respond to the staff's questions. Yuna's paper was put aside with a star marked on top, and the staff kindly added that they would be going to give a call again around the age of two, to see if she still cannot understand “basic words.”

Despite the general assumption that children are “linguistic sponges who quickly absorb the language or languages they hear and as a result, become

proficient speakers” (Hoff, 2018, p. 81), studies show that all children who hear two languages from birth are not necessarily becoming bilinguals. A review of research also shows that children from immigrant families often reach school age relatively unskilled in the majority language, while not necessarily showing strong skills in the heritage language (Shin, 2015). There may be individual and social factors, but one of the concerns widely circulated in popular media is that bilingual children will get “confused” with learning two different languages or show delays in language learning compared to monolingual counterparts. Thus, documenting Yuna’s language development process is therefore a valued opportunity to test out such propositions. In that sense, this study can be categorized as both intrinsic and instrumental case study (Stake, 2005) to facilitate and complement our understanding of bilingual development from birth.

II. Elements of early bilingual development

Hoff (2018) suggested three categories that are critical to children’s bilingual development: quantity of input, quality of input, and children’s use of language. Below, after giving a brief explanation to each category, I describe Yuna’s linguistic environments in terms of the three factors.

Quantity of input:

Quantity of input refers to how much a child is exposed to the target languages. The evidence is strong that language growth is influenced by the quantity of language input. What is often assumed is that because bilingual children’s input is divided between two languages, they must, on average, receive less input in each than monolingual children, and as a result, they develop each language at a slower pace.

However, the argument is not without controversies. It has been argued that given the wide variation in how much parents talk to their children, a bilingual child may not have less exposure to one language than a monolingual child. That is, a bilingual child in a rich language environment might hear one language more than a monolingual child in a poor language environment. Also, it has been argued that bilingual children experience no delay in single language development and not every study finds a statistically significant gap between skill levels of monolingual and bilingual children (Hoff, 2008).

- Korean: According to home language policy, Yuna was exposed to Korean from birth. From 4 months on, Yuna goes to Japanese daycare, and her

Korean exposure dropped to 2 - 3 hours per day. I interact with my husband in Korean and speak with Yuna in Korean unless there are Japanese or English speakers as a third party. Her father also exclusively speaks to Yuna in Korean. Over the two years, she met her grandparents twice, during which she was exclusively exposed to Korean.

- Japanese: On weekdays, she goes to Japanese daycare (9 to 5 pm), where she exclusively interact with teachers and peers in Japanese. On weekends, she often goes to a playgroup where the major languages are Japanese and English. In that group, I mainly interact with people in English.

Quality of input:

Quality of input concerns with what kind of language input the children get for their language development. Studies have shown the importance of native speaker input in children's language development because native speakers use a richer vocabulary and more complex syntax than non-native speakers. However, the role of native speaker input in bilingual children's language development is highly contested because one's linguistic repertoires and size of vocabularies are largely influenced by educational backgrounds and socioeconomic status (SES). That is, it is probable to think that a non-native speaker with high educational backgrounds could provide a rich input than native speakers whose educational or social backgrounds are minimal.

- Korean: As a native speaker of Korean, I use modern standard Korean for interaction with Yuna. Her father also shares the same linguistic background. While her grandparents speak in a southern dialect of Korean, there is no difference in vocabularies (the accent is noticeable, yet fully comprehensible). Her times with media, whether music or video, are mostly in contemporary Korean.
- Japanese: Her contacts with Japanese are all from native Japanese speakers, except her parents.

Children's use of language:

Bilingual children can choose the language they speak, and when one language is more prestigious than the other, they choose the more prestigious language. Studies show that French-English bilingualism is achieved more successfully in Canada than is Spanish-English bilingualism in the United States, and that the equal prestige of the two languages in Canada plays a role. In fact, who gets to

get access to what kinds of French is a complex social question (Heller, 2006). As Yuna has not yet reached the stage of deliberately choosing one language over the other, I make a speculative leap and discuss how she showed variations in production.

- Korean: As of 23 months at the time of writing, she cannot connect two words to articulate or convey a meaning (which would be identified as a sign of delay). She is capable of naming common objects (for instance, fruits, body parts) in Korean, but does not seem to know the usage of verbs to invite action from others. My observation is that she combines elements of Korean and Japanese to produce a sentence.
- Japanese: There are times that she seems to explain things to me or her father, or teachers. It seems that Yuna presents Japanese prosodic features in her speech. According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996), prosodic features include rhythm, volume, tempo, and intonation in connected speech. It is often claimed that Japanese is a language in which the topic-comment pattern is predominant. So it did not come as surprise when Yuna's (often incomprehensible) speech includes “~site” with rising intonation, and ~”siteta” with final lowering. This feature corresponds to a typical Japanese narrative structure that is used for describing events.

III. Data

The data for this research note comes from three different sources: the language development diaries, daily notes from daycare, and videos that shows her speech production. Relatively informal observations of her development were made up until 9 months, when there was discrepancies on what her first word, ‘mai mai’ meant for. The teachers assumed that ‘mai’ should mean my, as she would utter the word when asking for something. They thought I would speak English to her. Since I did not speak English to Yuna, however, I thought of it as a coincidence. Motivated by such different interpretations on what she meant for, I started writing about her developmental progress with a strong focus on language. I made a note when she says a word for the first time, and described under what contexts she uttered the word. Around 13 months, it became clear to the adults around her that Yuna was interested in communicating and capable of learning nonverbal as well as verbal labels.

The children's language development is often assessed by how many words the kids can produce. This quantitative approach often bears problems for bilingual

children, as their vocabulary development takes place in two languages with less input in each language compared to monolingual children. This research note thus focuses on nonverbal elements that constitute a key part of language development. As Shin (2017) noted, a child's language development requires comprehensive evaluation physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. The purpose of this study is not to seek out generalizability beyond the immediate the immediate research project, but to provide transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in understanding Japanese-Korean bilingual development from birth.

IV. Findings

1. The development of external speech

According to Vygotsky (1978), children not only act in attempting to achieve a goal but also speak: "Children not only speak about what they are doing; their speech and action are part of *one and the same complex psychological function* (emphasis original), directed toward the solution of the problem at hand" (p. 25).

He divided the language and cognitive development into three stages: external, social, and internal. Through a process of 'internalization', 'external', or 'social', speech, is transformed from a directly interpersonal, communicative means of regulating and directing the child's behaviour into 'inner speech', the medium of the child's own personal consciousness and will and of his or her capacity for purposeful and independent action.

Yuna's use of external speech to control action is often found when playing alone with bricks. She often says *oisyo* or *yoisyo*, a Japanese word to describe someone working hard in a cheerful manner. Her external speech does not necessarily correspond to the context, however. From 22 months, while playing alone, she often blurted out the word, "chigau", meaning wrong or different in Japanese, as if she was recalling the conversations at the daycare.

Her pronunciation became more accurate around 19 months. She also began to distinguish the subtle differences in producing vowels. There are 21 vowels in the Korean language. Of these, 10 are basic vowels, and the remaining 11 are double vowels (see table 1). In their study of production of monophthongs and diphthongs among monolingual Korean children (aged two to four), Song and Seong (2018) showed that children from an age group of 2.1 to 2.8 years showed significant difference in the accuracy level of both monophthongs and diphthongs as compared to those aged 2.9 to 3.4 years and those aged 3.5 to 4.1 years. Even though the study did not directly investigate when the monolingual children would produce the words, their study population (aged two to four) indicates that it is

expected for a child to produce words consisted of monophthongs around two years old. My observations indicated that Umma, Unni, /eo/ sounds seem still tricky for her. Even though she could say /eomma/, she seems to struggle with /eonni,/ That is, her ability to pronounce vowels varied depending on the final articles of a word.

Korean Alphabet Vowels

Korean	English
ㅏ	ah
ㅑ	ya
ㅓ	o
ㅕ	yo
ㅗ	oh
ㅛ	yo
ㅜ	ow
ㅠ	you
ㅡ	er
ㅣ	ee

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Table 1. Korean Alphabet Vowels (Basic)

Around 23 months, she began to externalize her speech and repeated the sounds or words she first heard. She also became interested in figuring out the names of common objects around her. Her ability to sing along the songs significantly increased. Through repeated exposure, she seemed to remember the rhythms of songs and sang along some words in accordance with the music being played. For instance, upon listening to Three Little Bears¹, Yuna spoke out with confidence the words “Jaranda”, meaning good work in Korean.

2. Prosody

Prosodic features (Stress rhythm, and intonations) are a fundamental part of language Studies have shown babies can recognize the intonation of their language as early as two months of age, before they acquire lexical items (e.g., Fernald 1989; Jusczyk, Cutler, & Redanz, 1993). It continues to develop during childhood until early adolescence. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) pointed out that misunderstandings

1 A Popular kid's song in korea.

resulting from improper intonation use can be more difficult to repair than those resulting from segmental pronunciation errors. That is, even if a speaker uses clear and correct grammar, a mistake in intonation can change the meaning or affective content of an utterance. At the social level, foreign accent can lead to linguistic racism, or racism based on accent, dialect and speech patterns.

Yuna uttered her first two-word phrase around 18 months, *Appa nenne*, in an answer to a question about her father's whereabouts. Her ability to use two words in utterance increased significantly around 23 months in the form of subject and predicates. The subject part was somewhat comprehensible to adults around her; the predicates part was often clueless. The Japanese prosody explicitly recognized by the ear of "foreigners" was when Yuna started direct communication with adults. Around 20 months, still incomprehensible, she began to use the structure of subjects and predicates to construct sentences. Her narratives often started with *って*, then it finished with *～てた*. Although she seems to have a need for communication with adults, it is still difficult to achieve communication goals with adults through words. And yet, I think it is meaningful to see how she can mimic Japanese prosody. This also shows her ability to observe and mimic people around her, as she must have picked up those sentence structure from elder kids at the daycare.

3. Symbolic gesturing

The development of relationships between gestures and referents is a milestone for children's linguistic and cognitive development. Yuna's first gesture was butterfly, arms stretching out with hands flapping. It appeared around 13 months, when she began to remember the melodies of the song *the Butterfly* [蝶々]. The same gesture appeared when she was hearing the Korean version of the song. Also, in referring to starts, she rotated her wrists with hands open, as she learnt from her grandmother. On hearing the familiar melodies of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Stars*, she used the same gesture, regardless of whether the song was sung in English, Japanese, or Korean version.

Another gesture that she learnt is 'hot'. Around 20 months, she made a frowning face, fanning with her hand when food is hotter than she expected. The gesture often comes with words, *atsu, atsu*, meaning hot in Japanese. Or sometimes she said *Ato, Ato*, meaning hot in Korean. For this movement, she used both Japanese and Korean. My speculation is that she may have picked up the language while having breakfast and dinner with me, and lunch with her daycare teacher. The same gesture appeared when she was watching me cooking. The gesture helped

her communicate with adults even if she cannot know or recall a name. For instance, when she saw me not wearing glasses, she made a circle with her thumb and index fingers and put them around her eyes. Recognizing that she wanted me to wear the glasses, I said her, do you want me to wear glasses, with the gesture she made. Since then, she was able to link the gesture and the referent she meant for and said “glasses!” to me if I am not wearing them. To her, it also means that I’m ready to play; you don’t seem to.

Not all words were cross-referenced with a gesture, however. For instance, I taught her a gesture of promise by interlocking the pinkies like in a pinky swear. While she imitated the gesture when I said *yaksok*, promise in Korean, she showed no response to *yakusoku*, the Japanese word for promise. From my observation, songs are important channels through which bilingual children acquire the meanings of vocabularies. Without explicit instruction on language, she repeated the gesture from the songs and seemed to gradually grasp the meaning of words that had been unknown to her. At this stage, without the mediation of songs, it seems to take more time and effort to understand the meaning of a word and under what contexts the word can be used.

V . Final thoughts

This research note has focused on how a bilingual child’s language development can be analyzed in terms of three aspects: external speech, prosody, and symbolic gesturing. Although the mainstream research has exclusively focused on the quantity of words kids can produce to assess the children’s language and cognitive development, the current case study supports a growing number of research that emphasizes the non-verbal aspects of language development.

While the goal of bilingual education is often understood as acquisition of vocabularies or native-like accents, many bilingual (or multilingual) families are reported to have fragmented proficiency in languages according to the linguistic and social requirements (Shin, 2017). As I have mentioned in Introduction, the common proposition- whether the children would get confused with learning two languages simultaneously- has to do with the monolingual belief, or ideology that bilingualism is a combination of two perfect yet independent languages, or what Heller (2006) called parallel monolingualisms. If we can suspend the idea of assessing bilingualism as the quantity of vocabularies, there is more growing need to understand nonverbal elements such as prosody or symbolic gesturing as legitimate and important area for supporting bilingual development. Finally, the current research note concludes with a quote from Hoff (2008), who gave a clear

goal of bilingual education:

One clear implication of studies of bilingual children is that we should not expect these children to be two parallel-monolinguals at all domains of language skills. Rather, we should encourage the children to develop competence in each language “to the extent required by his or her needs and those of the environment” (p. 6, cited in Hoff, 2008).

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