

# Bilingual by chance or by choice: language maintenance and loss in simultaneous and successive bilinguals

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This paper attempts to show the possible differences between simultaneous and successive bilinguals, ranging from age five to fifteen; in both groups, language maintenance has been analysed, in order to see how much it relied on the «chance» of living in a bilingual environment at an early stage of their life, and on the «choice» of their family to expose them further to both languages even when such favourable circumstances changed. Firstly, I have considered some significant aspects of language acquisition and use within the two groups of bilinguals and uncovered differences and similarities between them. In order to do this, I have collected data through a survey carried out in a British Primary School in Italy, attended by 250 pupils, ranging in age from 5 to 10 years. All the teaching was conducted in English, and pupils were required to have a fair knowledge of the language upon entering primary school. 249 questionnaires were distributed to the children's parents; out of these, only 82 were filled out completely and returned. In order to reach a more substantial data base, I supplemented the questionnaires with oral interviews, yielding a total of 100 cases. The work was facilitated by the fact that I personally knew most of the subjects and their families, as my own two children attended the same school. The age and sex distribution across subjects is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

	Boys	Girls
Age 4	1	1
Age 5	12	6
Age 6	11	6
Age 7	8	7
Age 8	9	12
Age 9	4	5
Age 10	9	9
	<hr/> 54	<hr/> 46
	Total: 100	

Out of these 100 children, 42 have been followed till the age of 15, when another questionnaire was distributed, and again the data were integrated with oral interviews and written tests. Table 1\* shows the age and sex distribution of the 42 children.

Table 1\*

	Boys	Girls
Age 13:5 - 14	2	3
Age 14 - 14:5	6	7
Age 14:5 - 15	4	10
Age 15 - 15:5	4	6
	16	26

Total: 42

I have divided the children into simultaneous and successive bilinguals, considering simultaneous bilingualism to be the case where L1 and L2 have been acquired at the same time, since birth, and successive bilingualism the case where acquisition of L2 has followed L1. The languages spoken by simultaneous bilinguals are referred to as L-a and L-b, as opposed to L1 and L2. The number of successive bilinguals in the present survey significantly surpassed that of simultaneous bilinguals, as appears on Table 2. On Table 2\* there is the distribution of the remaining 42 subjects.

Table 2

First words	Simultaneous bilinguals		Successive bilinguals	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1 year	7	9	12	11
1-1:5 years	11	3	13	8
1:5-2 years	5	2	4	8
2-2:5 years	0	2	2	3
	23	16	31	30
	Total: 39		Total: 61	

Table 2\*

	Simultaneous bilinguals		Successive bilinguals	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
	5	9	11	17
	Total: 14		Total: 28	

For the simultaneous bilinguals the question was raised as to whether or not their **first words** in L-a and L-b were equivalents. The answers showed that in 68% of the cases they were not; in both languages, they were always attached to specific contexts. The children remembered the particular language in which an event occurred. In our subjects, they were spoken more or less at the same age in both monolingual and bilingual children. The first words spoken by both groups of subjects are shown on Table 2. In the successive bilinguals, the acquisition of L2, usually at age 3 or 4, did not seem to cause any difficulties, but, on the con-

trary, was easily accepted. It must be pointed out that all the pupils belonged to families with a generally high educational level, and the parents were strongly motivated to give their children a bilingual education. Table 3 shows that most of the children had Italian as L1 and English as L2, with some instances of a different language as L1. The dominance of L1 over L2 did not seem to undergo significant changes during the children's early life, although there is evidence that some children, when having to deal with L3 as well, did reject one of the languages at a certain point. In the 22 cases of trilingual subjects, there was rejection of a language, at a given time, in 8 children.

**Table 3**

Simultaneous bilinguals	Boys	Girls	Total
Italian/English	10	11	21
Other L*/English	6	2	8
Other L**/Italian/English	7	3	10
*: 2 French, 3 German, 1 Norwegian, 1 Arabic, 1 Hungarian			
**: 1 French, 1 German, 2 Spanish, 1 Greek, 1 Cantonese, 2 Dutch, 1 Thai, 1 Finnish			
Successive bilinguals	Boys	Girls	Total
L1 Italian - L2 English	16	21	37
L1 English - L2 Italian	7	5	12
L1 other L* - L2 Italian - L3 English	6	2	8
L1 other L** - L2 English - L3 Italian	2	2	4
*: 1 Dutch, 2 Hebrew, 1 Armenian, 1 Hindi, 1 Japanese, 2 Swedish			
**: 1 French, 1 Spanish, 1 Persian, 1 Arabic			

In both groups of bilinguals, Italian was often used with friends when the conversation concerned life outside school, and English for all activities related to school life. In the following areas of experience: games, cartoons, sport, clothing, food – Italian was the language used in 79% of the cases, while in reporting school activities English was used in 84% of the cases. In our subjects ranging from age 4 to 6, English nouns were mainly inserted into an Italian utterance (71%). **Code-switching** gradually decreased with age. 47% of the children aged 7 to 10 code-switched regularly. We found no significant differences between simultaneous and successive bilinguals.

**Translation** seemed to cause problems in several cases. As many as 68% of the children belonging to either group did not translate easily, according to their parents, and this was true for translation from L1 to L2, as well as from L2 to L1. This was also the case with our teenage bilinguals. The meaning of two corresponding words, e.g. 'car' and 'macchina' learned in different situations may bear different associations and therefore lead to different images, and even though words in the two languages may share a common cognitive meaning, there is undoubtedly a different affective meaning: this could be one reason why translation often proves difficult and unsatisfactory.

**Pronunciation** in L2 seemed to be a problem in a few cases. Some of our successive bilinguals had a strong foreign accent, whereas most of the simultaneous bilinguals appeared to be

essentially native speakers in L-a and L-b . In fact, 86% of them had no foreign accent in either language, but 61% of the successive bilinguals had some difficulties in the pronunciation of L2. Intonation and accent were taken into consideration. The vowel sounds were the ones causing more difficulty.

In many cases, these problems tend to disappear with age, but it largely depends on the individual. In our subjects, the successive bilinguals who had retained both languages, only showed difficulties in 19% of the cases. They were mainly errors concerning intonation. A further study on this aspect is in preparation (Cohen, Hotimsky).

The children's **attitude** towards being bilingual tended basically in two directions: the conscious one and the natural, spontaneous one. The children who were conscious and proud of being bilingual all felt they were privileged and usually liked to show their competence: this happened more with successive bilinguals (77%). To the simultaneous bilinguals, knowing two languages from birth seemed natural, although they were certainly aware of their asset (59%). At 15 years of age, all of the subjects declared that they felt privileged and appreciated the fact of being bilingual. A common trait for both groups was the great interest shown in other languages (91%), their willingness to imitate unknown sounds and to quickly recognize different languages and dialects (83%). All the children appeared to profit from the dual cultural background, and from the influence of their families and of the school. There is little question that bilingual children not only do not suffer in moving from L1 to L2 and viceversa, but actually widen their horizons and strengthen their powers of adapting to the world (Titone, 1972). The parents of our subjects all supported this opinion.

A number of families, at a certain point, moved their children away from this bilingual/bicultural environment. Some had been transferred to another country, some others wanted the children to continue in the Italian school system. The question of language maintenance is quite a complicated issue. Although it varies according to the individual, there is a considerable possibility of language loss in children when the communicative need is absent (Vihman and McLaughlin, 1982). In our data there are a few cases of language loss in both bilingual and multilingual children. Language maintenance and loss in the 42 children of our study is shown on Table 3\*.

**Table 3\***

Language maintenance: 26

Simultaneous bilinguals		Successive bilinguals	
Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
4	5	11	6
Total: 9		Total: 17	

Language loss: 14

Simultaneous bilinguals		Successive bilinguals	
Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
3	2	6	3
Total: 5		Total: 9	

Language loss

Of 5 simultaneous bilinguals: 2 boys and 1 girl lost English, 1 girl lost Italian, 1 boy Hungarian.

Of 9 successive bilinguals: 5 boys and 3 girls lost English, 1 boy lost Swedish.

When the teenagers reached the age of 15/16, I distributed two short questionnaires, one to the children, and one to their parents. All of the 42 subjects answered, and so did 35 parents.

The first question to the young people who had not been exposed to two languages for the past four years or longer, was if they still felt bilingual. The answers reflected the real situation, that is: 87% did not feel bilingual any more. Many of the parents of those children who had lost one of the languages stated that their children were still bilingual, in spite of the fact that in all areas tested they scored poorly, and that the results were comparable to the level of monolingual children with L2 as a foreign language. This is probably due to the fact that most parents consider that, once bilingualism is acquired, it is an asset for life and that their children understand the language and can possibly speak it without any problem. Instead, 'like endangered species, languages under threat can die, unless they are protected' (Romaine, 1995). One of the tests was particularly revealing: the children had to tell a joke (previously read out – one in English, one in Italian) in both languages. The jokes were all recorded, and the two aspects that were immediately noticeable in the group of the 'limited bilinguals' were the very high level of interference and the foreign pronunciation. In the group of the successive bilinguals who had maintained the two languages, instead, there was an improvement in 71% of them. Also, the language used by both groups of bilinguals, simultaneous and successive, who had maintained their bilingualism, was at the level of their monolingual peers in both languages, as far as grammar, vocabulary and syntax was concerned, whereas the 'limited bilinguals' had a poor vocabulary, and used an over-simplified language, similar to, but not as good as the one they used when they mastered the two languages, that is, when they were 10/11 years old.

The **conclusion** is that parents who have, in one way or another, fostered their children's bilingualism from a very early age, should go on and make a further effort to provide them with the necessary stimulus in both languages/cultures. The bilingualism of one parent is not sufficient to ensure that the child maintains both languages. Family friends, peers, and regular trips to the country of the 'weaker' language should be a first priority. This requires a lot of effort from the family, because the child's motivation is weakened, once there is no functional need for using the other language. But, as the family did, or happened to – by choice, or by chance – provide the child with an early bilingual setting, it is of the utmost importance that this initial advantage be maintained. Otherwise, as results also from the data gathered, after a few years one of the languages will inevitably become much weaker, or passive, or the child will become completely monolingual, most probably with only a fair knowledge of the other language as L2.

One might object that a limited or passive knowledge will eventually lead to a renewed bilingualism, once the 'abandoned' language is taken up again. It is not always true, and it largely depends on the individual. In any case, it is quite unlikely that a balanced bilingualism will be achieved once more.

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