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Bilingual Language Acquisition

How do children develop bilingual competence? Do bilingual children develop language in the same way as monolinguals? Set in the context of findings on language development, this book examines the acquisition of English and Spanish by two brothers in the first six years of their lives. Based on in-depth and meticulous analyses of naturalistic data, it explores how the systems of both languages affect each other as the children develop, and how different levels of exposure to each language influence the nature of acquisition. The author demonstrates that the children's grammars and lexicons follow a developmental path similar to that of monolinguals, but that cross-linguistic interactions affecting lexical, semantic and discourse-pragmatic aspects arise in Spanish when exposure to it diminishes around the age of four. The first of its kind, this original study is a must-read for students and researchers of bilingualism, child development, language acquisition, and language contact.

CARMEN SILVA-CORVALÁN is Professor of Spanish in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Southern California.

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Bilingual Language Acquisition

Spanish and English in the First Six Years

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For Nicolas and Brennan,
porque no tomaron el camino más fácil.

And for all bilingual children.

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Series editor's foreword

The series *Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact* (CALC) was set up to publish outstanding monographs on language contact, especially by authors who approach their specific subject matter from a diachronic or developmental perspective. Our goal is to integrate the ever-growing scholarship on language diversification (including the development of creoles, pidgins, and indigenized varieties of colonial European languages), bilingual language development, code-switching, and language endangerment. We hope to provide a select forum to scholars who contribute insightfully to understanding language evolution from an interdisciplinary perspective. We favor approaches that highlight the role of ecology and draw inspiration both from the authors' own fields of specialization and from related research areas in linguistics or other disciplines. Eclecticism is one of our mottoes, as we endeavor to comprehend the complexity of evolutionary processes associated with contact.

We are very proud to add to our list Carmen Silva-Corvalán's *Bilingual Language Acquisition: Spanish and English in the First Six Years*. The author provides detailed analyses of language development data collected over several years from two siblings who happen to be her own grandchildren. She compares the data and her findings with those of other English-Spanish bilingual children reported in the literature, and with other interesting cases involving other languages, such as the Cantonese-English bilingual children that were the focus of a previous publication in the CALC series: *The Bilingual Child* by Virginia Yip and Stephen Matthews (2007). Thus the book provides findings that facilitate informed comparisons that raise questions about universals of bilingual language development and the role of the social environments provided by the home and the extended family in determining ecology-specific peculiarities. Other interesting questions include whether there are learning differences between her child subjects and how to interpret them. Are there differences that reflect interindividual variation in learning skills and contribute partly to shaping the singularity of speakers' idiolects? Or can one also go as far as to claim that such differences, if they obtain, may also reflect the likelihood that humans may not be equally gifted in "social learning?" The question also applies to other cultural domains, assuming that language is a cultural phenomenon, although one may still invoke some

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Universal Grammar or "language organ" to account for some of its ontogenetic and architectural properties. On the other hand, are there differences that have to do with one child having benefited, at the same age, from more interactions with the older population, including the other sibling, than the other? When it comes to language dominance, are personality differences a factor that should not be ignored? How does one define the ecology of bilingual child language development?

There are also some traditional questions, such as whether children are really perfect language learners. What happens in settings in which some of the speakers do not speak at least one of the languages in an "uncontaminated" way – that is, unaffected by the influence of the ethnographically dominant language, either Spanish or English in the present case? What factors determine language dominance in the bilingual child? Other than frequency of use, are there structural reflexes of language dominance? Is there evidence of language dominance in all aspects of language structure? *Bilingual Language Acquisition* covers many different aspects of the grammars of English and Spanish. There are a number of similarities, but there are also quite interesting differences between the two languages, some of them more obvious than others. The reader will undoubtedly be interested in whether there is consistency system-wise and interindividually in the kinds of confusions that the children experience. Are there any similarities between the experiences of the bilingual child and those reported about adult L2 learners or bilinguals?

There is a great deal to be learned from this book about the mind of a child as an arena of competition not just between the languages in contact, from an ethnographic point of view, but also between their structures, from the point of view of the emergence of the grammars associated with the different languages. Although different readers will certainly be interested in different aspects of the subject matter, I am also sure that many will share my experience in "witnessing" the linguistic development of these children through Carmen Silva-Corvalán's informative narratives that provide the contexts for the production of several constructions. The data are also presented so adequately that not knowing Spanish is not a factor that should prevent the reader from learning comparatively about developing native competence in two languages. The book also conjures up the question of whether all first-language competences are equal, regardless of whether a speaker is mono- or bilingual.

SALIKOKO S. MUFWENE, *University of Chicago*

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Preface

This book is written with the joy of a grandmother who feels that the study of her grandchildren, the focus of this book, can make a contribution to the understanding of early bilingual development and the human capacity for language. English and Spanish have always been present in our home. I spoke both with my children, switching smoothly from one language to the other depending on their appropriateness in a given communicative situation. Naturally, when the grandsons were born, their parents and I made the decision to expose the children to both languages from birth to facilitate their becoming bilinguals. I, the grandmother, was determined to use only Spanish with the children to counteract the strong presence of English in the family and the larger community. Being a linguist, I also decided to follow closely and record the children's language development in a systematic way. How children acquire language so quickly has interested scholars for thousands of years. Less well investigated is how children learn two languages concurrently. This was the interesting and challenging question I presented to myself and now address in this book, where I examine the bilingual development of two of my grandsons, Nico and Brennan, to about age six.

In many cultures and countries around the world (e.g., Wales, Spain, Indonesia, India, Kenya, South Africa), bilingualism is a part of ordinary daily life and represents the norm as far as language acquisition and use are concerned. In these regions, the acquisition of two or more languages is considered neither a cognitive feat nor a hindrance; it is simply a matter of course. But the children in the present study did not have an easy journey into bilingualism. There were bumps along the way, especially when the vehicle used was Spanish, an unofficial, minority language in the children's environment. Yet they succeeded, each one to a different level of bilingual proficiency, and, thanks to dual-language elementary education, they became literate bilinguals in Spanish and English. As was to be expected, the community and official language of California, English, developed into the siblings' dominant language and evidenced only a few features characteristic of a language being acquired alongside another one: in particular, the use of Spanish words in English utterances. Spanish, however, soon showed some

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more obvious effects of the strong presence of English, as the ensuing chapters will show.

Clearly, Nico and Brennan's two languages were equally activated during these early years, but from early on the two language systems were differentiated, both structurally and pragmatically. The typical ecology of the bilingual mode frequently led to mixed language interactions which the siblings handled with great dexterity, switching languages to fit that of the interlocutor. Indeed, even though the children knew that all their family members also spoke English, in their earlier years they chose Spanish to communicate with those who used this language to communicate with them, and English with the rest of the family. Nico and Brennan were the ideal research subjects, talkative, always ready to play with Grandma, eager to be told or read stories and to make up stories, and accepting of the tape recorder (at least during their toddler years).

An undeniable characteristic of language acquisition is individual variation. Although Nico and Brennan's bilingual environment and development is typical of many children around the world, the reader may question how representative their specific language development may be. Would it be possible to generalize from a case study? I argue that it is possible, if the study is set in the context of other findings on bilingual language development, which this study is. Furthermore, the present study connects the siblings' development with some aspects of the language of second- and third-generation adult Spanish-English bilinguals (*heritage speakers*), who show similar language contact features and thus support the validity of the observations made on the basis of the siblings' data.

This has been a long but thoroughly enjoyable research journey. Reviewing over and over the many hours of diary notes and audio recordings that form the rich database for the studies reported in this book, collected over many years, has given me the opportunity to relive the early years of the siblings' life: their first words, their realization that they speak differently with different people, their remarkable capacity to develop two language systems, their rich imagination, their stories, their dreams, and their ability to create new words and sentences by blending two languages. While writing this book I have relived the wonder of bilingual development. I hope the reader will share this joy.

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Brennan and Nico with Grandma after a soccer game

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Acknowledgments

The two siblings who are the focus of this book, Nico and Brennan, have made this study possible. Their early bilingual development in a dual-language environment seemed inevitable and effortless. But as they grew older and English became stronger, they could have stopped speaking Spanish, as many children in a similar situation do. But they didn't. So thank you, Nico and Brennan, for contributing to our knowledge of what it means to grow bilingual by "sticking with it" and allowing me to document your language development. I also thank your parents, Rodrigo and Dianna, for their positive attitude toward bilingualism, for letting me invade their privacy with the intimidating tape recorder, and for also making some recordings of your conversations with them. I feel fortunate to have been able to conduct much of my research while enjoying family life. I am grateful to your grandpa Scott and your uncles and aunts, Diego and Kathy, Fernando and Cynthia, for creating a caring and diverse environment that encouraged your dual-language development. I also thank Samantha, your younger sister, and your cousins, Kristine, Kathryn, and Jackson, for bringing much joy to our lives. Samantha was born when I was engaged in organizing your data, transcribing, editing, and writing papers. Unfortunately, I was unable to include her language development in this study. Samantha's first five years of age were surrounded by English and Spanish, but she spoke only English until she entered El Marino dual-language school. I thank this school for offering bilingual education and thus making it possible for Samantha and many other children to develop productive bilingual orality and literacy.

I am especially grateful to Salikoko Mufwene for the expert advice and guidance he has given me. Sali deserves special recognition for his intellectual support and encouraging remarks during every phase of the writing process. I have done my best to take into account his valuable critical observations and meticulous editorial suggestions. I may not always have succeeded, so any remaining errors are my own.

Thanks are also due to Helen Barton for believing in my project and encouraging me to write the book. Helen, Alison Tickner, Helena Dowson, and Christina Sarigiannidou steered the book skillfully toward publication.

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Abbreviations

2L1	two first languages
Adj	adjective
AdvP	adverbial phrase
Aux	auxiliary
BFLA	bilingual first language acquisition
CL	clitic pronoun
Cond	conditional
CondPerf	conditional perfect
Cop	copula
Fem	feminine gender
Fut	future
Ident	identification
ILP	individual-level predicate
Imp	imperfect
ImprPol	polite imperative
ImpProg	imperfect progressive
Impr	imperative
ImpSub	imperfect subjunctive
Ind	indicative
Inf	infinitive
L1	first language
L2	second language
LINF	low informativeness
LOLI	lone other-language item
Masc	masculine gender
MLU	mean length of utterance
MLUm	mean length of utterance in morphemes
MLUw	mean length of utterance in words
Neg	negation
Noms	nominal subjects
NP	noun phrase
NS	null or non-overt subject

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OSV	object subject verb
OVS	object verb subject
Part	participle
PastPerFut	past periphrastic future
PastProg	past progressive
PER	person
PerFut	periphrastic future
PL	plural
Pluperf	pluperfect
PluSub	pluperfect subjunctive
PP	prepositional phrase
PPL	person plural
Pres	present
PresPart	present participle
PresPerf	present perfect
PresProg	present progressive
PresSub	present subjunctive
Pret	preterite
PretProg	preterite progressive
Pros	pronominal subjects
PSG	person singular
Q-word	Spanish interrogative word
S	subject
SDM	separate development model
SG	singular
SLP	stage-level predicate
SOV	subject object verb
Sub	subjunctive
SV	subject verb
SVO	subject verb object
SVX	subject verb any constituent
TMA	tense, mood, and aspect
TNS	tense
Trans	transitive
UG	Universal Grammar
ULS	unitary language system
Unerg	unergative
VOS	verb object subject
VS	verb subject
VSO	verb subject object

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