

## Chomsky's theory and early bilingualism

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### Теория Хомского и ранний детский билингвизм

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**Abstract:** *the article analyzes speech samples recorded from bilingual children as well as speech samples of over 20 children aged between 18 months-6 y.o in a diglossic language situation within the framework of Chomskian generative grammar principles. It has been noted that communicative aspect plays a prominent role and may go against generative grammar rules in the situation of natural functional bilingualism. In a diglossic language situation ( a certain functional type of bilingualism with “low” and “high” languages or language varieties) the structural component is more pronounced in the “high sphere” language; at the same time, utterances are often idiomatic, which gives rise to doubts concerning the role of the generative component in the use of “high” language variety.*

**Аннотация:** *в статье анализируются особенности речи детей-билингвов с позиций генеративной грамматики Хомского. Проанализированы образцы речи двух детей-билингвов, а также образцы речи более двадцати детей в возрасте от 18 мес. до 6 лет, находящихся в ситуации диглоссии. Обращает на себя внимание тот факт, что коммуникативная составляющая играет важнейшую роль и может идти вразрез с принципами генеративистики в ситуации естественного функционального билингвизма. В ситуации диглоссии (вариант функционального билингвизма, при котором один из языков носит статус «высокой сферы») значение структурного компонента более выражено; одновременно с этим, высказывания зачастую носят стереотипный характер, что ставит под сомнение значительную роль генеративного компонента при использовании языка «высокой сферы».*

**Keywords:** *bilingualism, diglossia, generative grammar.*

**Ключевые слова:** *билингвизм, диглоссия, генеративная грамматика.*

The author's interest in language acquisition goes back to the early 1990s, when, staying with a friend in London, she saw her (at that time monolingual) English-speaking three-year-old twin sons point at each other simultaneously as one of them quickly said, “He broke the bed”, while the other one said, “Him broke the bed”. How could it be that two twin brothers simultaneously produced utterances so different in form although similar from the point of view of communicative intention? Now if we look at these utterances, how would that work in transformational grammar? Following Chomsky, S->NPVP “He” is fine for NP, but how do we go about “Him” in the initial position? Do we apply filters? If so, how does that work? What is wrong with the phrase “broke the bed”? How and when does the child learn the right way to speak, is it due to negative or positive evidence [1]? Nevertheless, it is obvious that both utterances seem to be fine in terms of successful communication.

Now if we take a look at how a newborn baby starts language acquisition (let alone cognitive categorization; that, as was successfully shown by Vygotsky in his experiments in the 1930 [2], later reproduced by E. Rosch [3], can be independent of language up to a certain point) – how and when does it start? N. Lepskaya [4] shows that a baby starts communicating during the first three months of his life by uttering cries, consonants and vowels. Moreover, G. Chirsheva [5] has also noted that intonation patterns already differ in neonates, whose language environment is different, although babies initially do produce sounds that may not necessarily exist in their mother tongue. Therefore, the “phonological instrument” may well be universal. However, the manifestation is different. At this point the author will skip the babbling and syllable stages and go directly to speech samples recorded from bilingual and diglossic children aged 18 -72 months. Children in a diglossic situation tend to learn and use the L-variety more easily, with generative grammar possibly playing an important role in language acquisition. The H-variety utterances appear to be idiomatic, learned rather than generated, prevailing well after phrasal speech in the L-variety is well-formed. Speech samples were recorded from over 20 children in a kindergarten, where one of the carers was British, one – Russian. The mother tongue was Russian for most of the children. Although 99% of all the subjects demonstrated passive understanding of English (which had the status of an H-language in that particular situation), independently produced utterances were in most cases set expressions (e.g., “What’s the weather like today?”). Among themselves the children used the L-variety. We contrasted this against speech samples recorded from a girl spoken to only in English by a non-native speaker from the moment when the child was born, and also in Russian by her father, a native speaker of Russian). What language was she acquiring? Vygotsky maintained that the primary function of language is

communication. As long as the child was successfully communicating her needs, there was nothing wrong with her language (it might even be something like Chomskian *aabbb*). What did she come up with? English is an analytic language with a fixed word order and relatively few inflections. Russian is a synthetic language with case endings (which make fixed word order redundant). At the age of 12 months the girl would generally just prefer the word that she found it easier to get out, e.g. “ball” instead of “myachik”, “car” for “machine”, “sok” for “juice” regardless of the language spoken at that time. However, she definitely preferred “efefant”(sic) to “slon”, “kobablik” to “s’ip(Ship)”, “umbrella” to “zont” although she did know the words in both Russian and English. It seems that it was the phonetic form that mainly guided her choice at that time. Listening to the recordings, one finds relatively few consonant clusters, which are believed to be typical of Russian (but are so difficult to pronounce, i.e. *agentstvo* etc). On the other hand, one finds that the child would sometimes use indefinite articles incorrectly, thus creating a *hiatus* (more typical of Russian), e.g. “a ambulance”. At 18-24 months the girl started producing her first NPs (but not VPs): “yellow sharik”, “takaya car”, “fish akula”. The fact that NPs seem to have appeared earlier than VPs might be explained by the influence of Russian syntax, where nominal structures seem to dominate. At 24 months, Anya started generating her first sentences. The word order she used was sometimes VN (more typical of Russian) “letit plane”, “hoch [-u/-et – typical Russian verbal ending is missing] egg”, sometimes it was NV “train somalsya”, the word order probably representing the lexical item ‘train’ as the *theme* and ‘somalsya’ (note the absence of the second consonant – ‘sloalsya’) – the *rheme* (also note the typical Russian reflexive suffix –*sy*a). One may also notice the absence of auxiliaries and commonly omitted inflections in her speech between 24 and 36 months, e.g. “mama feet” (sometimes *feets*, but not a single occurrence of *foots*-a possible argument against generative grammar, as this particular lexical item seems to be memorized rather than generated), “daddy sleepin”, “this <is a> butterfly” (a possible argument in favour of generative grammar, she could not have learned those passively). At the age of approx. 36 months auxiliaries do appear and generally in the right position, e.g. “car’s gone”, “is daddy sleepin?” One might also notice that by this time she is already making a clear distinction between the two languages. Another strong argument in favour of the generative theory would be that she seemed to have “placeholders” – [nə-nə-nə] for various structural elements. E.g. “What colour is < nə-nə-nə > wuf (roof)?” seems almost like a perfectly grammatical question in English and she DOES need a placeholder for the article. Here is another one, “Where < nə-nə-nə > Joey live? Finally, one sample seems to be of particular interest: a 3-year-old girl in the situation of artificially created functional bilingualism chatting to a naturally bilingual 3 y.o. boy (Russian mother and American father).

[SIMULTANEOUSLY] - [GIRL] *Wow, kakaya big wave!*

[BOY] - *That's a big wave!*

[BOY] – *Smotri, bol'shaya wave!*

[GIRL] - *Jump'ai!*

Arguments, definitely supporting Chomskian theory would be the existence of the following:

- Ungrammatical expressions like “mama feet”, “feets”, “breaeked” – could not have been learned passively, only generated “placeholders” – strongly supporting the structural theory.

Generally, the existence of various functional types of bilingualism is beyond doubt, moreover, in the contemporary world purely monolingual children may not always easily be found in our multinational surroundings. Therefore, the issue of language acquisition by children from multilingual backgrounds remains a highly important one and deserves further studies.

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