Language through a prism: Patterns of L2 internalisation and use in acculturated bilinguals

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Abstract

This paper investigates the extent of L2 use in language functions in sequential bilinguals following migration, and reports on patterns of L2 internalisation. Respondents consist of 149 highly educated L2-competent Polish–English bilinguals who relocated to the UK (12 out of the 149 participants were residing outside the UK (Republic of Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia)) as young adults, and underwent processes of acculturation. Language functions under investigation include inner speech, cognitive, and communicative functions. The independent variables include acculturation level, social network profile, length of residence, and predicted future domicile. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Respondents completed an online questionnaire and were interviewed by the researcher. The study included the Complementarity Principle into the operationalisation and measurement of language use in bilinguals (Grosjean, 2016). The findings revealed a consistent variation in the extent of L2 use across different language functions. Links were established between the extent of L2 internalisation and acculturation level, social network profile, and predicted future domicile. The results showed that sociocultural integration is a reliable predictor of the extent of L2 use across language functions. This study adds an acculturation perspective to current research on L2 internalisation and language development across lifespan, by measuring and juxtaposing the extent of L2 use across different language functions in sequential bilinguals following migration.

Keywords: Acculturation; Bilingualism; Communicative function; Cognitive function; Inner speech; Language development across lifespan

1. Introduction

In the present era of increased mobility-migration, many bilinguals face a situation where they use a language learnt later in life for a significant part of their communications, be it professionally, socially, or as a form of participation in public life in the host country (Dewaele, 2016; Grosjean, 2015; Singleton et al., 2013). Sequential bilinguals who relocated from the context where their first language (L1) was dominant, to the context where their second language (L2) is dominant, find themselves in the midst of a typical language contact situation, which holds a significant potential to alter their language use patterns across different functions of language use (de Bot and Schrauf, 2009; Grosjean, 2010; Schrauf, 2014). According to the Complementarity Principle (CP) proposed by Grosjean (2016), bilinguals use different languages for different purposes. A certain function of language may be attended solely by one language, or a combination of two or more languages, one of which may be dominant (Grosjean, 2010). Socially, languages are used to exchange information,
communicate with others, as well as express loyalties and manifest identities (Dewaele, 2013a; Edwards, 2013, 2009). However, language functions stretch far beyond interpersonal communication, as languages are used extensively for internal, cognitive, and contemplative purposes respectively (Cook and Bassetti, 2011; Dewaele, 2015a; Grosjean and Ping, 2013; Pavlenko, 2014). An illustrous example of L2 use for non-verbal purposes is that of Eva Hoffman's diary (1989), which describes her linguistic transition from Polish to English following involuntary relocation to Canada in 1959, as a result of an emigration wave out of Poland. Her diary is a unique account of an individual experience of acculturation, which was progressing alongside a gradual, consciously experienced and carefully depicted language shift at an individual level (Hammer, 2015). In contrast to language shift at a community level, which is typically analysed across generations (Wei, 1994), language shift at an individual level is analysed across a single timeline, which informs research on language development across the lifespan (de Bot and Schrauf, 2009). Hoffman (1989) described her journey of linguistic trials and tribulations, which ultimately resulted in a linguistic transition from Polish L1 to English L2, where the latter became her dominant language. The process of language shift described in Hoffman's diary (1989) began from the outside, from the social realm of instrumental language use from where it began to gradually develop, progressing through the cognitive compartments of consciousness, and expanding linguistic ability, to finally populate the deepest psychological dimensions of inner speech. Language shift at the individual level is a reflection of gradual processes of internalisation of the new language (Pavlenko, 2014), which progresses across different functions of language use (Schrauf, 2002).

L2 internalisation is understood as an extension of L2 use beyond social and communicative realms, into the more intellectual spheres of internal information processing and finally, the ability to think verbally in the L2 (Guerrero, 2009). The ultimate source of internal speech is thus seen in the sociocultural context (Lantolf and Thorne, 2007; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1986). In a recent blog, Aneta Pavlenko (2015) reflected on the effects of immersion on the acquisition and use of L2, and pointed out that immersion in L2-dominant contexts has an impact on the nature of language processing, for a wide range of skills, emotions and autobiographical memories are engaged into the process, which enables the L2 user to integrate information from a variety of authentic sources. Processes of L2 internalisation include a significant increase of L2 use, where the latter may begin to attend those functions of language which were previously attended exclusively by L1. In the case of Eva Hoffman (1989), the change of context and immersion in a new sociocultural, L2-dominant reality, increased her L2 use, which extended from the original communicative function, via the cognitive, to finally appear in naturally occurring inner speech (Hoffman, 1989). In the context of mobility-migration, new and interesting questions arise, namely: to what extent can a change of linguistic and sociocultural context alter external and internal language use in sequential bilinguals? Do acculturation-oriented factors have an effect on the extent of L2 use across different functions of language use in those bilinguals? Do sequential bilinguals who use more L2 externally, use proportionally more L2 internally? Dewaele (2015b) calls for more research into the links between sociocultural variables and language use; Pavlenko (2014) suggests that more research is required to describe a shift in linguistic performance in bilinguals; de Bot and Schrauf (2009) and Lowie et al. (2009) call for more research into language development across the lifespan. The present paper responds to the above calls by investigating the extent of L2 use in language functions including inner speech, cognitive and communicative functions, measuring it against acculturation-oriented variables, and reporting on patterns of L2 internalisation in sequential bilinguals following migration.

2. Literature review

2.1. Acculturation and language use in bilinguals

There is a strong link between migration, acculturation and the use of language (Esser, 2006). Acculturation is understood as a psychological as well as cognitive process which results in a cultural and psychological transition (Berry, 2005). At the individual level, acculturation is associated with processes of adaptation to the new society and culture, which involves behavioural shifts, as well as a reorientation of thinking and feeling (Brown, 1994). The latter, psychological dimension of the process is referred to as psychological acculturation (Graves, 1967; Sam and Berry, 2006). Acculturative processes begin to unfold following migration, and they are closely connected with learning the new culture, degree of maintenance or shedding of the original culture, linguistic and cultural practices, communication styles and linguistic identity (Berry, 1992, 1980; Zane and Mak, 2003). Patterns of language use in particular are indicative of the degree of acculturation, for more extensive target language use is associated with a smaller psychological distance in relation to the new culture, and of higher degree of sociocultural integration (Acton, 1979; Regan, 2013; Schrauf, 2009). Research by Debaene (2013) and Debaene and Harris (2013) on Polish–English bilinguals in Ireland confirmed strong links between integration and language use. The use of the target language is also linked to group membership and the extent of L2 socialisation (Regan and Nestor, 2010). Nestor and Regan (2011) found that the extent of sociocultural integration of Polish L1 schoolchildren in Ireland was reflected in the children’s language choices and their association with, or distancing from particular social networks.
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