



# They speak what language to whom?!

## Acculturation and language use for communicative domains in bilinguals



Kate Hammer

*Birkbeck, University of London, UK*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the extent of second language (L2) use across four communicative domains in 149 highly educated L2-competent sequential Polish-English bilinguals resident in the UK.<sup>1</sup> The domains under investigation include: work, household, interest group, and peer group. Work and interest group count as public domains, while household and peer group count as private domains. The independent variables include acculturation level, social network profile, predicted future domicile, and length of residence. The instruments include an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The results show that bilinguals who acculturate to a higher level use the L2 more frequently, even in private domains. The findings also suggest that bilinguals who operate in majority L2-speaking social networks, use the L2 more frequently during informal conversations with other L1-speakers at work.

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## 1. Introduction

Communicative function of language revolves around information exchange, self-expression, as well as establishing, maintaining and strengthening social relationships with other people (Scollon, 1995). In the era of international mobility-migration and cultural transition, countless bilinguals find themselves in a position where the L2 replaces the L1 in the majority of professional, social, and communicative areas of life (Dewaele, 2015a; Hoffman, 1989). Changes from L1- to L2-speaking contexts cause a significant shift in language use for interactive purposes. Levels of L2 attainment, language dominance, as well as participants and context of interaction, are typically seen as core coordinates in communicative language use (Milroy, 1987; Wei, 1994). Wei points out that 'language is a social notion; it cannot be defined without reference to its speakers and the context of its use' (Wei, 2007, p. 12). Research on language preferences show that bilinguals tend to have their favourite language for particular purposes (Dewaele, 2011; Grosjean, 2010). The overall realm of experience can be divided into different domains of life for which bilinguals may use different languages (Schrauf, 2002). According to Grosjean (2016) language use in bilinguals is said to be domain-specific, and some domains might attract higher levels of L2 than others. The mosaic of linguistic complementarity will depend on the individual history and language preferences of the speaker (Dewaele, 2010; Grosjean, 2010).

Communicative domains of language use are characterised by different levels of formality and intimacy, and can be divided into public and private domains (Côté and Clement, 1994). From a social point of view, domains can also be defined as

*E-mail address:* [k.hammer@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:k.hammer@bbk.ac.uk).

<sup>1</sup> 12 out of the 149 participants were residing outside the UK (Republic of Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia).

‘institutionally relevant spheres of social interaction in which certain value clusters are behaviourally implemented’ (Fishman, 1971, p. 17). Professional spheres of interaction often require specific languages and even jargon to be used, not only for pure communicative purposes, but also to show belonging and unity with co-workers. Interaction in the domain of work has been linked to acculturation dynamics and professional progression (Komisarof, 2016). In the era of increased mobility-migration, globalisation and late modernity, language use is closely linked with processes of sociocultural integration and identity-formation (Blackledge et al., 2008; Preece, 2016a, 2016b; Regan et al., 2016). Languages used to communicate with others are social manifestations of cultural identity and belonging (Joseph, 2004). The act of communicative language use is inherently connected with the sociocultural context and Fishman’s (1965) question of ‘who speaks what language, to whom, when, how, and why?’ still requires further explorations (Spolsky, 2005, p. 254). Dewaele (2015b) calls for more research into the sociocultural aspects of language use.

The aim of this paper is to undertake a comparative investigation of the extent of L2 use in communicative domains, and analyse it against variables associated with L2 performance and international mobility-migration, including acculturation level, social network profile, predicted future domicile, and length of residence. The communicative domains of language use investigated in this paper include work, interest group, household, and peer group. Domain of work explores the extent of L2 use in a workplace; domain of interest group explores the extent of L2 use during externally organised voluntary educational or leisure group activities; domain of household explores the extent of L2 use at home; and domain of peer group explores the extent of L2 use within informal social gatherings with friends and acquaintances.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Communicative language use and acculturation

Large-scale studies showed that bilinguals tend to have linguistic preferences when expressing particular types of content, or when communicating with particular groups of interlocutors, for example work colleagues and friends (Dewaele, 2010). Patterns of language use for communicative purposes are connected with sociolinguistic aspects of mobility-migration, and integration (Debaene and Harris, 2013; Kim, 2000; Regan, 2013). Integration is one of the outcomes of acculturation, where the latter is defined as ‘those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups’ (Redfield et al., 1936, p. 149). Acculturation is said to be one of the strongest causal variables in SLA (Schumann, 1986). Empirical evidence suggests strong links between acculturation and linguistic performance, for acculturation levels were found to be tightly linked to proficiency levels in sequential bilinguals residing in L2-contexts (Hammer and Dewaele, 2015). Language practices across multiple domains of life, including communication styles, language use, and language preferences, reflect individual choices made with respect to the acquisition of the new culture, and maintenance (or shedding) of the old culture (Zane and Mak, 2003). According to Berry (1997), choices made by the individual result in the adoption of one of the four acculturation strategies, namely assimilation, integration, separation or marginalisation. Assimilation is understood as the outcome characterised by a significant shift towards the new culture, with a minimal level of old culture participation (Berry, 1997). Integration is defined as ‘merging one’s life and being functional in several domains of two cultural worlds’ (Boski, 2008, p. 143) and is understood as integrating the new and the old cultures together (Berry, 1997; van de Vijver and Phaet, 2004). Separation refers to heritage culture maintenance, and rejection of the host culture, the social consequence of which is referred to as segregation (Berry, 1997). Marginalisation refers to the rejection of the heritage culture with a simultaneous failure to adjust to the new culture, which may have psychopathological consequences (Devarenne-Megas, 2003; Tousignant, 1992).

Rates of acquisition, frequency of L1/L2 use, and linguistic preferences are linked to, and reflect, the acculturation process and its outcome, as well as provide clues to the individual becoming a member of the target culture (Acton and Walker de Felix, 1986). Brown (1986) points out that ‘the process of acculturation runs even deeper when language is brought into the picture (...) culture is a deeply ingrained part of the very fiber of our being, but language – the means for communication among members of a culture – is the most visible and available expression of that culture’ (Brown, 1986, p. 34). Language use for communicative function is linked with the context of language use, as well as issues of identity, and speech community membership (Cashman, 2005; Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b; Wei, 1994, 2007). Development of new social networks in the host country is linked to the level of sociocultural integration, and may contribute to the acculturation outcome. Individuals either seek to communicate and connect with members of L1-speaking social networks, which results in formation of ethnic minority communities, or they adopt an approach independent of L1-oriented, co-national affiliation (Chiswick and Miller, 2005; Noels, 2014). Regan and Nestor (2010) found that linguistic practices of sequential Polish-French bilinguals in France were indicative of other sociocultural aspects of integration, as well as the extent of L2 socialisation. L1 was found to be mostly used in private settings and when communicating with relatives, but it was not the preferred language choice when addressing other Polish-French bilinguals in public situations (Regan and Nestor, 2010). Processes of acculturation and sociocultural integration, marked by patterns of language use and language choice, are core aspects in the development of linguistic identity.

Group membership in adulthood, referred to as *a posteriori*, is said to depend on individual decisions and attitudes, rather than to be determined organically, referred to as *a priori* (Dittmar, 1989). One’s social network profile can change over time, as length of residence in the host country increases, which does not make it a fixed-value variable, though in some cases it can

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