
A Balanced Relationship of Languages in a Bilingual Society

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Abstract

Given the United States' increasingly multilingual population, it is important to understand clearly the nature of bilingualism. This paper outlines a symmetrical, integrative model of bilingualism that predicts that the bilingual's two languages influence each other. The paper begins with a theoretical rationale for such a model and continues with research evidence supporting the influence of the bilingual's first language (L_1) on his or her second language (L_2) and vice versa. The factors promoting L_1 perseverance in the L_2 environment are also closely considered. The model itself is then detailed. Following this, practical recommendations based on this model are offered. Finally, implications of this model for the bilingual are presented.

A Balanced Relationship of Languages in a Bilingual Society

Bilingualism, or knowledge of two languages, has been an important linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon in the U.S. for at least the last two centuries (Kloss, 1998). The growing population of residents, whose first language is not English, combined with the increasingly multilingual nature of international business and communication, make it even more important to understand the nature of bilingualism and find efficient ways to integrate this phenomenon into this society and its educational system.

A crucial aspect of bilingualism is the relationship between the bilingual's two languages. This relationship has historically been believed to be unidirectional (i.e., one's first language [L_1] influences one's second language [L_2]) (Ellis, 1986). U.S. scholars and educators are also currently concerned about the effect of one's L_1 on one's L_2 because they are looking for ways to improve ESL learning at all levels, starting with elementary school and continuing into adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Some recent works (Cook, 2003), however, support the idea that, in fact, the

bilingual's two languages influence each other. In other words, L₁ and L₂ are found to be in a mutually beneficial relationship.

The goals of this paper are: 1) to examine the relationship between L₁ and L₂; 2) to argue for a symmetrical, integrative model of bilingualism that assumes that each of the bilingual's languages influence the other; 3) to identify the factors that support the L₁ perseverance in the L₂ environment; 4) to make some practical recommendations based upon this model; and, 5) to discuss some implications this model has for the bilingual in today's society.

These goals are addressed in the following ways. The mutual relationship of L₁ and L₂ is explored using a symmetrical, balanced, integrative model of bilingualism. This model assumes that the bilingual's two languages are integrally related and that L₂ influences L₁ just as L₁ influences L₂. Moreover, this model acknowledges the importance of preserving the mother tongue (L₁) of L₂ learners (Cummins, 2003). The paper begins with a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of an integrative model of bilingualism. Next, evidence is presented that supports L₁'s influence on L₂; evidence is also presented that supports L₂'s influence on L₁. Following this, the paper moves to a discussion of some of the factors affecting the way in which L₂ influences L₁. The argument is made that factors such as language environment (i.e., is L₁ or L₂ the dominant language?), family and community influence, age of acquisition, and workplace influence (is L₁ or L₂ spoken in the workplace?) affect the extent to which L₂ influences L₁. By affecting these factors, we can either increase or decrease this influence; this may have profound social, cultural, professional, educational, and personal consequences. The paper continues with some practical recommendations for applying this model in the classroom and community and concludes with some general implications of this model for bilinguals.

A Theoretical Rationale for a Symmetrical, Integrative Model of Bilingualism

Two sets of theoretical assumptions underlie the symmetrical, integrative model of bilingualism. The first theory, universal grammar (UG), holds that there is a set of universal principles of grammar that govern all languages (Haegeman, 1994). Different languages instantiate, or parameterize, these principles in different ways; however, all languages obey them.¹ As an example, contrastive linguistics gives numerous instances of commonalities among even dissimilar languages. If this theory is correct, then there is one underlying set of linguistic mechanisms that the language learner uses while learning a L₂. Since both of the bilingual's languages obey these principles, it is logical to suppose that these languages should influence each other.

The second theory that supports the integrative model of bilingualism is the model of Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) (Cummins, 1994). This model assumes that both of the bilingual's languages are informed by the same underlying assumptions about the way language works. Therefore, a proficiency in one language supports the development of the proficiency in another language(s). These two interrelated hypotheses actually predict a model of bilingualism in which the two languages influence and support each other (Kinberg & Serdyukov, 2003).

¹ See Chomsky (1995) or Haegeman (1994) for detailed discussions of the theory of principles and parameters.

Research Evidence That Supports L₁ Influence on L₂

The idea that L₁ influences L₂ is certainly not a new one and there is recent evidence to support this position. For instance, Juffs (1998a, 1998b) has conducted studies of speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Romance languages who were learning English. In one of these studies, Juffs found that speakers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean took longer to parse English than did speakers of Romance languages. The argument structure of Chinese, Japanese and Korean differs significantly from that of English; whereas the structure of Romance languages is akin to English. Therefore, Juffs concluded that these learners' L₁s were affecting their parsing of English. It is important to note that Juffs also presented these learners with a grammaticality judgment task and found no L₁—related differences in accuracy on this task. That is, L₁ learners did not affect their ability to judge the acceptability of English sentences. It would seem, then, based on Juff's findings, that one's L₁ affects the parsing and processing strategies one uses to learn another language, but not one's ultimate attainment of proficiency in that language.

Other recent research into L₁ effects on L₂ acquisition has been conducted by Jarvis (2000), who conducted a study of Swedish and Finnish learners of English. Jarvis (2000) showed each group a short film and asked respondents to write a short narrative of what they had seen. He then asked participants to list as many nouns as possible to describe a series of freeze-frame clips of the film. Finally, he asked learners to choose from a list of English words all those that were appropriate to describe the same freeze-frame clips of the film that were used in the second task.

Jarvis (2000) found that speakers of Swedish responded in a similar way to other speakers of Swedish and speakers of Finnish resembled other speakers of Finnish in their responses, which might have been predicted. He also found differences between the responses of the two language groups. At first glance, this finding would support a case for L₁ influence on L₂. However, Jarvis (2000) did not find the striking differences between groups that would have been predicted by a model of L₂ acquisition that assumed influence. Jarvis (2000) suggested that this result might have obtained because of cultural similarities between the two groups of learners which might have led to their making similar responses on some of the tasks. In sum, the above research shows that L₁ does influence L₂, and, assuming that Jarvis is correct, this influence may vary depending upon such factors as age of acquisition and similarity of the two languages involved.

Given that L₁ does influence L₂, what does this imply? In the educational setting, the implication is that bilingual learners' L₁s should be supported as they acquire a L₂; in other words, additive bilingualism (i.e., the case where L₂ is added to L₁, rather than replacing L₁) is predicted by a model that includes L₁ influence on L₂. "...in general, building a sound foundation of communication skills (including literacy) in primary languages is the surest and often quickest route to English proficiency" (U.S. Department of Education, 1995, p.24).

Research Evidence That Supports L₂ influence on L₁

The theoretical assumptions discussed above predict a model of bilingualism in which L₂ influences L₁ and there is evidence to support such a model. For instance, Saville-Troike, Pan, and Dutovka (1995) studied the language development of groups of children from several different L₁ backgrounds who were learning English. These researchers found that where elements of the children's L₁s were stable, uniform across the language, and not in direct conflict with English, L₂ had little influence on these children's L₁ grammars. However, where elements of the children's L₁s were not fully developed, were not uniform across the language, or were in direct conflict with English, L₁ was affected by L₂. If these researchers are correct, then these findings suggest that L₂ may have an influence on L₁.

When English is learned as a foreign language, that is, in the L₁ environment, we observe a tremendous influence of L₂ on L₁. Translation is the predominant method of semantization and, at the same time, a popular method of learning a foreign language. Students who are translating foreign words, phrases and whole texts need to adequately render their meaning into their primary language; this necessity makes them search for adequate linguistic forms of expression in their L₁. This process expands and improves their L₁ competency. L₂ on L₁ influence affects mostly such aspects of language proficiency as vocabulary, syntax, and style. However, when English is being developed as a second language in the English environment, this effect (to be discussed in more detail below) may be anywhere from significant to negligible depending on several major factors. This influence is predicted by the integrative model of bilingualism. Given such a model, we need to examine the factors that may influence the effect of L₂ on L₁.

Our observation of 20 Russian immigrant families demonstrated that, with few exceptions, children who were brought to the U.S. at the age of 7 to 8, that is, with a fully developed L₁ communicative competence, usually lost their native language fluency by the age of 16 to 18. Though they still understand most of the Russian language when older family members speak to them, they tend to respond to them in English. This asymmetric linguistic behavior cannot help restricting communication and, consequently, relationships between the young generation that grew up in the L₂ environment in the U.S., and the older generation (parents and, especially, grandparents) who, having arrived in the U.S. at an advanced age, usually do not acquire full English proficiency. This breakdown in communication leads to the loss of both L₁ and native culture. However, it is important to note that this loss can be diminished by the family's consistent support of L₁. Such support manifests itself not only in obligatory use of the L₁ in family communications, but in reading L₁ books, watching L₁ videos and TV broadcasts, and purposefully including children in L₁ community activities.

Unfortunately, in the population we observed, only 4 children out of 20 were able to preserve their language and culture, thereby being equally fluent in English and Russian and having a reasonable native cultural background. This was attributed solely to the parents' assiduous work and time spent on educating their children. Interestingly, we observed that even young adult Russians who retain L₁ fluency prefer to communicate with each other in English. These young people explain their choice of the language by saying that it is more natural for them to discuss their everyday life, school, movies, and other social and cultural issues that interest them, in English than in Russian because these issues are U.S.-based; they exist in the English language

environment only. In this example, we see the heavy impact of the L₂ environment that imposes not only a linguistic but also a content framework on native non-English communicants; this framework may consequently affect the choice of the language for communication.

Which Factors Affect the Influence of L₂ on L₁?

There are many variables that may affect the influence of L₂ on L₁, among them are language policies, demographics, L₁ communicative role, family culture, and so forth. In this article, only a few of the most important factors that seem to play a significant role in the way that L₂ influences L₁ will be discussed.

Language Environment

It is logical to suppose that L₂'s influence on L₁ would be stronger in cases where L₂ is the dominant language; this prediction is supported by recent findings. For instance, Verhoeven and Boeschoten (1986) found that the L₁ development of Turkish children living in The Netherlands lagged significantly behind that of their peers who were living in Turkey. In a phonological study of native speakers of English who moved to Brazil, Major (1992) found that his respondents' proficiency in Portuguese corresponded directly with their loss of English proficiency. Presuming these findings to be accurate, we may argue that L₂ is more likely to influence L₁ if L₂ is the dominant language.

Family/Home/Community

If it is true that L₂'s influence on L₁ is greater if L₂ is the dominant language, then how can we explain findings where L₁ is relatively unaffected by a dominant L₂? This was the case in Abu-Rabia's (1999) study of Russian-speaking high school students living in Israel. He found that these young people maintained their Russian despite what they perceived as a great deal of social and pragmatic pressure to use Hebrew.

It is possible that Abu-Rabia's findings are reflective of the strength of the influence of the family and cultural community. These speakers of Russian socialized mostly with other speakers of Russian, were supported at home in their use of Russian, and were exposed to Russian-language newspapers and other media. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that in this case, the influence of family and local community may have superceded the influence of the larger L₂ community.

Support for this possibility comes from the work of Richards and Yamada-Yamamoto (1998), who interviewed Japanese families living and working in the U.K. These researchers found that their respondents maintained their Japanese and encouraged their children to do so as well. These families socialized with other speakers of Japanese more often than with their English-speaking colleagues and acquaintances. Their children, too, were more likely to socialize with Japanese playmates than with English-speaking playmates. Richards and Yamada-Yamamoto concluded that this case of L₁ maintenance was due to parental concerns about their children's ability to compete successfully with their peers who had remained in Japan. If this is true, then we may argue that these findings show the influence that family and cultural community may have on degree to which L₂ affects L₁. There are some cases of community-based

activities that are conducted in both languages; for instance, in one Eastern Orthodox Church in San Diego, the service is alternatively delivered in English and in Russian.

Age of Acquisition

The extent to which age of acquisition affects the learner's ultimate proficiency has been a matter of debate for years. There is certainly evidence (Bialystok, 1997) that younger L₂ learners seem to acquire a new language more easily than do older learners. However, is the influence of L₂ on L₁ affected by the learner's age? There is little evidence comparing the effect of L₂ on L₁ in children with the effect of L₂ on L₁ in adults. However, as Saville-Troike, Pan, and Dutovka (1995) found that certain aspects of children's L₁ were affected by their L₂ where the component of L₁ was not fully developed or consistent across the language. Therefore, it is logical to suppose that if these learners were older, their L₁s would have been more fully developed. In this case, L₁ might have been less influenced by L₂. In analyzing the language issues particular to Russian immigrant families, we found out that the older adults were when they came to the U.S. without English proficiency, the more difficulty they experienced in mastering the language. There are Russian communities in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other major U.S. cities where one can meet people who, even after 10 or 15 years of living in the U.S. are still unable to communicate in English for various external and internal reasons, such as opportunity, work needs, and motivation although they managed to acquire some everyday colloquial words and expressions. We observed a different pattern, however, with children arriving in the U.S. at 5 to 8 years of age. (See the discussion above). Certainly, more research examining the effects of age of acquisition on L₂'s influence on L₁ is needed. At this point, though, we may argue that the existing evidence seems to hint that there are indeed age affects on this influence (i.e., the younger and less proficient the child is in his or her L₁, the greater will be the effect of L₂).

Workplace Influence

One final factor that may influence the effect of L₂ on L₁ is the **impact** of the workplace. If L₁ is the language spoken in the workplace, even if it is not the dominant language of the community, this influence would lessen the effect of L₂ on L₁. One can notice this situation in, for instance, many ethnic restaurants where the personnel is usually composed of representatives of one culture. Commonly, they speak their language among themselves and with the majority of their customers belonging to the same ethnic group. When they are addressed in English, they may be at a loss as to how to respond. When asked how long they have lived in the USA, many state they had been in the country for many years already.

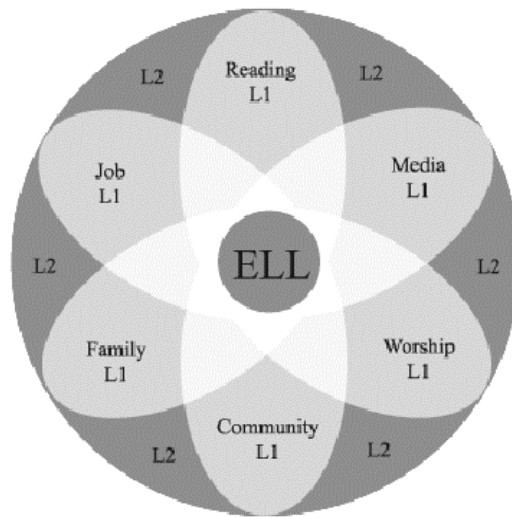
On the other hand, we see a different pattern if the workplace language environment is English. In this case, if a non-native speaker is willing and able to perform his or her job adequately and get a promotion, he or she usually is able to improve it with or without any external support.

A Symmetrical, Integrative Model of Bilinguality

Thus far we have made the arguments that L₂ influences L₁ and that this influence is affected by several factors, such as school or mass media. Hence, it is

reasonable to suppose that these factors do not operate independently. If we consider that one's family, community, place of worship, and workplace are usually interrelated, then it seems likely that the influences of these various factors would also be integrated. We illustrate this interdependence below:

Figure 1
Factors Influencing the use of L₁ in the L₂ Environment



As shown in Figure 1, there are six major factors influencing the use of L₁ in the L₂ environment: (1) family (i.e., parents and other family members talking to children and involving them in various L₁ activities) and friends belonging to the same language group; (2) community (community-based activities and learning); (3) houses of worship (teaching and conducting religious services either in the L₁ or in both languages); (4) L₁ mass media (e.g., ethnic newspapers, TV, and radio); (5) reading (books and other printed material in the L₁); and (6) workplace (training for and performing on the job in both languages, e.g., Russian stores in Brighton Beach, NY, and Mexican restaurants in California). These six factors are closely interrelated.

Given this model, it is logical to argue that the amount of L₂ spoken and encouraged in any of these environments will affect the extent to which L₂ influences L₁. Specifically, the more these environments reinforce the use of L₁, the weaker will be L₂'s influence on L₁, and vice versa (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
The Use of L₁ vs. L₂

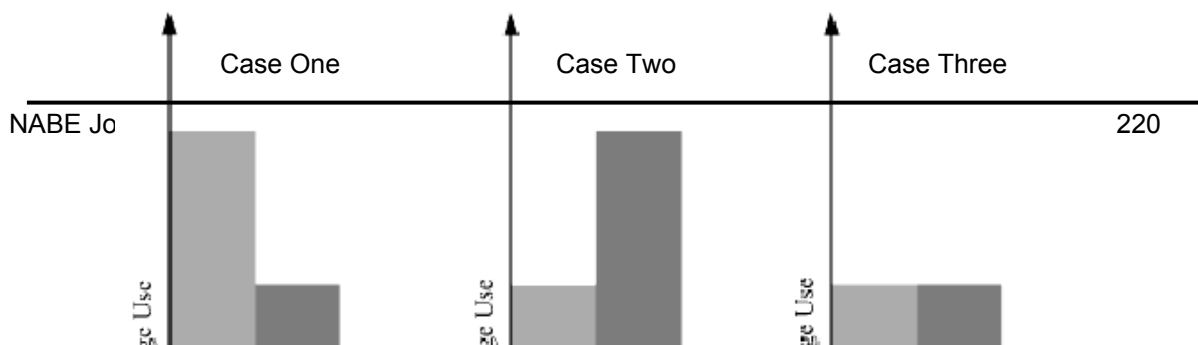


Figure 2 depicts three possible cases of the use of L_1 versus L_2 . In Case One, L_1 dominates. Examples of this case may be found in closed communities such as the Russian community in Brooklyn and the French community in Louisiana. In Case Two, L_2 dominates. This is the case in the majority of U.S. communities. In Case Three, the use of L_1 and L_2 is balanced (symmetrical); this is the ideal case. Examples of this case may be found in some educated bilingual families in many areas of the U.S. Thus, we consider such a relationship to be more of a cultural than of the geographical nature. We recognize the difficulty of achieving this goal, but it is certainly feasible, particularly in view of the growing trend towards bilingual education in the U.S. and the numerous cases in which L_2 proficiency has not led to L_1 attrition.

It will be recalled, for instance, that Abu-Rabia (1999) found little effect of Hebrew on his respondents' Russian. In this case, the home, cultural community and media environments all supported the use of L_1 ; therefore, L_2 had relatively little effect on L_1 . Conversely, Sutton-Spence (1999) found a great deal of influence of English on the British Sign Language (BSL) used in the U.K. In this case, the larger community uses the L_2 (English), the cultural (BSL) community does not, overall, discourage borrowing from English, and most BSL users use English in the workplace. This suggests that, since English is the language most often used and encouraged in the BSL user's environments, English has had a strong influence on BSL.

Some Practical Recommendations for Educators

What are the implications of the symmetrical, integrative model for the educator? The following practical recommendations based on this model can help engage students in both L_1 and L_2 . These recommendations can be classroom-based or community-based.

Classroom-Based Recommendations

The research discussed above (Verhoeven & Boeschoten, 1986) suggests that L_2 's influence on L_1 is greater if L_2 is the dominant language. Evidence (Saville-Troike, Pan, & Dutovka, 1995) also suggests that this influence is especially strong during childhood, when one's L_1 is maturing. This being the case, it is logical to suppose that students who are in classrooms that support their L_1 are more likely to preserve that language than are students whose classrooms do not. We therefore suggest the following activities for teachers and their bilingual students: doing research, writing essays, and making presentations on students' L_1 , culture, history, geography, literature,

and music. Students might also teach their peers some of their L₁ (a class period of 15 min twice a week for a month per language) or read a favorite book in their L₁ and tell the class about it. Such activities allow students to use their L₁ regularly, as Cummins (1994) has promoted, thus preserving their L₁. In a truly bilingual classroom, becoming proficient in English does not necessarily mean less use of and loss of proficiency in L₁ (Major, 1992).

Community-Based Recommendations

Involvement in the community can also be helpful in maintaining one's L₁. For example, students might interview members of their families, their friends and their neighbors or members of the community on some issue and report it to the class or to the family. They might also participate in a community activity and present their experience to the class, the community, or their families. Students could as well invite their English speaking peers to an activity in the L₁ community.

These and other activities can help develop and support L₁ in an L₂ environment. As Richards and Yamada-Yamamoto (1998) point out, an important reason for which an ethnic minority may hold itself apart from the ethnic majority is fear of language loss. Abu-Rabia (1999) has also noted that there is often a great deal of community pressure to speak the dominant language. These factors contribute to mutual suspicion and misunderstanding between groups. They also may lead to language attrition. By contrast, in a community that supports L₁ maintenance, there are fewer struggles for language dominance. There is therefore less likely to be pressure to give up one's L₁ and less mutual intolerance. Students who are learning English can thereby maintain a more balanced pattern of L₁ and L₂ use. At the same time, native speakers of English, who are learning another language in this context, can have more opportunities for exposure to their new language, thus increasing their communicative competence in that language. In this way, the integrative, symmetrical model of bilingualism described here can be useful in increasing intercultural awareness and decreasing mutual suspicion and distrust among the various language groups in the U. S.

Conclusions and Implications

What does an integrative model of bilinguality entail for the bilingual in today's society? One important implication is that, since L₂ and L₁ influence each other, L₂ learners are aided in their language learning task by the information and, particularly, the linguistic and communicative skills they get from their L₁ and vice versa, as has been argued by researchers such as Cummins (1994). This being the case, it is beneficial for the bilingual if both languages are supported within the bilingual's various language environments. Otherwise, in the school environment "...without ongoing school support for bilingual communication skills, most students will lose their primary language proficiency, and their literacy skills in any language may stall at the early elementary level" (U.S. Department of Education, 1995, p. 24). In the workplace, an integrative model of bilingualism implies that the need to better understand, explain, and translate job-related matters in L₂ and effectively function on the job demands a more profound knowledge of L₁.

What does a symmetrical, integrative model of bilingualism mean for the community in which the bilingual functions? One connotation of this model is that the communities in which the bilingual is equally free to use either of his or her languages are more likely to produce balanced bilinguals. Accepting the fact that in a contemporary democratic, diverse society a state of balanced bilingualism is desirable, ethnic communities might considerably benefit from the society's promoting and encouraging bilingualism. This could be accomplished by such means as active community life, community events in the L₁, availability of books in the L₁ in local libraries, and bilingual community leaders who serve as role models.

Much more research needs to be done to examine closely the effects of these various factors on the extent to which L₂ influences L₁. There are also other factors which may become apparent as the phenomenon of L₂ influence on L₁ continues to be studied. Various relationships between L₁ and L₂ in the L₂ environment should be investigated. The authors hope that this symmetrical, integrative model of bilinguality provides a useful construct for further investigation.

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