

BILINGUAL FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE MECHANISMS OF SUBSTRATE INFLUENCE

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This paper draws together two fields of study, early bilingual acquisition and language contact, showing close parallels between transfer at the individual and substrate influence at the societal level. Romaine (1996) emphasizes that 'the bilingual individual is the ultimate locus of language contact', while Thomason (2001) considers bilingual first language acquisition as a mechanism of contact-induced change which has been relatively little studied to date. Pursuing these two ideas, we show how the developmental patterns in bilingual Cantonese-English children parallel prominent features in a contact variety of English, namely Singapore Colloquial English, spoken by a community of native speakers (Gupta 1994). At the individual level, we document the gradual development of some grammatical features of the bilingual children's English, while at the societal level, we show that what takes a generation to develop as a distinct variety of English in a community can develop naturally in these children in a matter of a few years.

The bilingual children investigated are from one parent – one language families in Hong Kong who have been exposed to English and Cantonese since birth. They are studied longitudinally using a large corpus of recorded interaction in the two languages (between age 1;6 - 3;6) as well as diary data (from age 1;0 - 5;0). We show that language contact features independently developed in these subjects' English recapitulate those found in Singapore Colloquial English, a variety of English that is given rise by a language contact situation involving Chinese dialects, Malay and English. Cases of grammaticalization of English lexical items, illustrated by *already* as an aspect marker (1), *give* as a passive marker (2) and *one* as a nominalizer (3), are shown to occur ontogenetically in parallel to the contact-induced grammaticalization observed in Singapore Colloquial English (Bao 1995, Bao & Wee 1999).

- (1) She wake already. (2;06)
- (2) Here is give Timmy scratch. (points to scratched leg) (3;06)
- (3) The... blow the flute that one? (5;3)

The deeper interest of such comparisons between bilingual development and language contact lies in what individual bilingualism may reveal about the mechanisms by which language contact phenomena come about. At the grammatical level, we observe syntactic transfer in individual speakers; at the societal level, families or groups shifting from a Chinese dialect to English may "assimilate" the same transferred structures, which are then observable as substrate features. One implication of this line of research is that children may play a more important role as agents of contact-induced change than recent accounts such as Croft (2000) and Mufwene (2001) have suggested.