

Bringing up baby

Recent studies suggest 'one parent, one language' is not the best strategy. Barbara Zurer Pearson investigates

"One parent, one language" (OPOL), as a household strategy for "natural bilingualism", has a long history and a loyal following. In the folk wisdom that has, until recently, dominated our knowledge of childhood bilingualism, it is the near unanimous recommendation.

OPOL is the earliest printed advice to parents we know of, dating back to the French linguist Grammont at the beginning of the 20th century.¹ Parents from two language backgrounds speak to their children in their own language, giving them someone to speak each language with on a regular basis. This is also thought to help them keep the two languages separate in their minds.

OPOL is still the major recommendation in most parts of Europe and Canada. However, other strategies have recently been gaining ground. The "mixed language policy", where both parents speak two languages in the same conversations, and even in the same sentences, is, perhaps, the most widespread. In Southeast Asia, for example, parents generally speak two or more languages and expect their children to do so too.

The mixed system is clearly quite feasible, but in situations where languages are endangered, language revitalisation experts, such as Joshua Fishman,² recommend that a second language have its own separate domains, where it is used for different functions, and does not have to compete directly with the majority language.

Revitalisation projects suggest another strategy, which I call "time and place": two languages are separated not by person, but by time or place, or both. In a bilingual school, for example, maths may happen in one language, and science in the other. Going abroad is another way to use a



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change of place to bring about a change of household language.

A specialised form of "time and place" is "minority language in the home" (mL@H), where the non-community language is the home language. Some mL@H families speak the majority language outside the home, so each parent uses two languages with the child, depending on where they are.

These four are just the broadest outlines of the thousands of different constellations of language resources families have available to them. But which is best? Until recently, we had little more than personal experience to

guide our choices. The literature had mostly single-case studies on childhood bilinguals by people who were successful in their efforts.³ The researchers were very often linguists, who were also the parents in the case studies. We never heard from people when their bilingual project did not work. There were no surveys of large numbers of unselected samples.

We now have three or four new sources of evidence that go beyond the case study. Belgian sociolinguist Annick de Houwer reports the results of her own survey of 1,450 mostly Dutch/French families in Flanders,⁴ and also a re-analysis of Masayo Yamamoto's 188 bilingual families in Japan.⁵

The first surprising statistic is that nearly 80 percent of the Flemish and 75 percent of the Japanese families did not use OPOL. Many used the "1 parent/2 languages" strategy (m@Lh). More than 40 percent used a hybrid system, where one parent spoke one language to the children, and the other spoke that language and another one with them.

So, what is the outcome? How many families from each strategy had children who spoke two languages, as opposed to just one? According to De Houwer's findings, the 1 parent/2 languages method produced the most active bilinguals – 79 percent, compared to 74 percent using OPOL, and 59 percent using a mixture of the two methods. Among Yamamoto's sample, figures for "successful" active bilinguals were somewhat higher: 1 parent/2 languages 93 percent, OPOL 83 percent and mixed systems 88 percent.

De Houwer probed further to see if families were more successful if the mother was the source of the minority language, rather than the father. There was no



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WORD OF MOUTH

How can parents make informed choices about raising their children bilingually?

significant difference: 82 percent versus 80 percent. The most revealing table, however, is the one that looks at whether the parents spoke to each other in the minority language or the societal language (see box). Those that spoke the minority language were much more successful.

Still, we must be cautious in interpreting a survey such as De Houwer's. Although the number of families represented is impressive, we know only what the language situation was in their house at the time of the survey. It did not ask, for example, about changes in family habits and/or circumstances. We can wager that among 1,450 families, a significant portion had changes in their language resources during the years preceding the survey, and such changes could contribute to the outcomes.

While I was coordinator of the Miami Bilingualism Study Group, we tracked 18 bilingual families to see how much of each language the children heard, and how that affected the balance of their vocabularies in each language. In seven of the families, this changed – in some cases from one language dominating to the other dominating.⁶ When families reported a change, evidence of it did not show up straight away. There appeared to

be about a two-month delay. Then the child's double-language inventory would follow on.

The wider picture

Across the world, languages are being lost at an alarming rate; not just little-known languages in exotic places, but whenever a parent's language is not passed down to their children. Where a parent's language appears to be flourishing, they rarely consider this threat. This is one of the reasons that intergenerational language loss is such a

the language there, yet Spanish in Miami is fuelled by its immigrants, not by its children.⁷

ML@H, the household strategy that came out ahead in these surveys, is also closest to the methods suggested by revitalisation activists, who try to prevent languages from being submerged. ML@H parents are carving out a domain for the minority language where it doesn't have to compete for the child's time and attention. OPOL does so as well but, in my opinion, the lines between the domains are less clearly drawn.

Notes

- 1 Grammont, M, *Observations sur le langage des enfants* ("Observations on Children's Language"), 1902, Melanges Meillet, Paris
- 2 Fishman, J (ed), *Can Threatened Languages be Saved: Reversing Language Shift*, revisited, 2001, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon
- 3 Romaine, S, *Bilingualism* (2nd edition), 1995, Blackwell, Oxford
- 4 De Houwer, A, *Bilingual First Language Acquisition*, 2009, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon
- 5 Yamamoto, M, "Language Use in Families with Parents of Different Native Languages: An Investigation of Japanese Non-English and Japanese English Families" in *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 2002, 23 (6), 531-554
- 6 Pearson, B Z, Fernandez, S C, Lewedag, V and Oller, D K, "Input Factors in Lexical Learning of Bilingual Infants (Ages 10 to 30 Months)" in *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 1997, 18, 41-58
- 7 Eilers, R, Pearson, B Z and Cobo-Lewis, A, "Social Factors in Bilingual Development" in McCordle, P and Hoff, E (eds), *Childhood Bilingualism: Research on Infancy Through School Age*, 2006, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, pp.68-90

The most revealing results look at whether parents spoke to each other in the minority or societal language

problem in places such as Miami, where Spanish is widely spoken. No strong steps are being taken to help parents to pass on

PARENT TO PARENT**PARENTS SPEAK TOGETHER IN:**

Societal language
Non-societal language

CHILD SPEAKS TWO LANGUAGES

Flanders Survey: 36 percent
Japan Survey: 59 percent
93 percent 100 percent

De Houwer, 2009