

BILINGUALISM IN IMMIGRANT CHILDREN

A Preliminary Essay

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Bilingualism is clearly a positive social phenomenon, and immigrant children should be encouraged to become and remain bilingual. There are three stages of language acquisition, and it is the family's response to the second stage, in which the child shows a preference for the new language, that will determine whether the child loses the native language or emerges as a bilingual adult.

The first draft of this mother-daughter collaboration was written in 1987. At that time, Sonia was a college student at the University of Chicago, and Ida worked as a resettlement worker at the Jewish Family and Community Service in Chicago. This essay has been reviewed and revised throughout the ensuing years. Now, Sonia is a law professor and Ida works in immigrant services for the New York federation.

We embarked on this project because of its personal significance. Our family emigrated to the United States from the former Soviet Union in 1975. At that time, Sonia was 6 years old and her sister Ellen was 19. Sonia learned English quickly in summer camp and in school and went through a period where she preferred to speak English; Ida and Vladimir (Ida's husband) had to work hard to ensure that she kept her Russian language skills. Soma took some advanced Russian classes in college to improve her writing skills and to help her better understand the grammatical structure of the Russian language. She married an American and now speaks English to her husband and Russian to her parents and other relatives.

Ellen also learned English, but it was easier for her to keep her Russian since she arrived in the United States as an adult. Ellen graduated from Brandeis University with honors and married a fellow immi-

grant. Her children were both born in the United States and are being raised in a bilingual household. Ellen now works for the Jewish Community Center in Brookline, Massachusetts.

All the members of our family have had to deal with bilingualism in varying degrees. Our personal experiences, as well as Ida's work, have given us a good insight into aspects of bilingualism in children. In this essay, we have used personal examples where we felt appropriate. We hope that our essay will elucidate some of the aspects of bilingualism and will add to this important topic in immigrant communities and in American society.

Bilingualism is common in the United States. The reason for this is simple: The United States is a country of immigrants. Immigrant children grow up in families where the older generations speak the native tongue, while the younger generations prefer to speak the newly acquired language. As one expert has noted, "People rarely make a conscious decision to become bilingual; it happens because their interaction with the world around them requires the use of two languages" (Grosjean, 1982, p. viii). Bilingualism creates certain difficulties, not only in relationships between family members of different ages but also in relations between the immigrant children and their American peers.

Bilingualism has been defined in many ways. For example, American linguist Leonard Bloomfield's definition of bilingualism is "native-like control of two languages" (Beardsmore, 1982, p. 1). Another suggested definition is that bilingualism is simply "having two languages" (Saunders, 1983, p. 9). The description that we prefer and that we use in this essay in the following:

Bilinguals are rarely equally fluent in their languages; some speak one language better than another, others use one of their languages in specific situations, and others still can only read or write one of the languages that they speak. And yet, what characterizes all of them is that they interact with the world around them in two or more languages (Grosjean, 1982, p. vii).

This article focuses on bilingualism in children of first-generation immigrant families, using examples from the Russian Jewish immigrant community. It discusses three stages in the development of bilingualism in children and the potential pitfalls and difficulties at each stage. The article examines the reasons for some of the difficulties with bilingualism and suggests some solutions.

We believe that bilingualism is clearly a positive social phenomenon. Although this has been debated, the general consensus is that this is true (Saunders, 1983, pp. 14-22). The goal of this article is to offer some suggestions for how to ensure that immigrant children become and remain bilingual.

THE EMERGENCE OF BILINGUALISM

An immigrant family may arrive in the United States with little or no background in English. The older generation(s) learns English much more slowly than the younger generation. The older immigrants prefer to speak their native language, and to ensure family unity and a sense of security in their new country, they encourage their children to do the same. However, whereas grand-

parents certainly, and parents probably, may have the luxury of maintaining their native language, the process of assimilation for the children necessitates a more definitive break with the old language.

The reason for this generational difference is that, at least in the beginning, the main support groups for the older generation immigrants are primarily fellow immigrants who share the same language. The children, however, though they may have some friends who speak their native language, are sent into a school environment where they are exposed mostly to American children. This is not a new phenomenon. "[I]n the United States an unknown number of minority Americans have become bilingual in the public school system. From the turn of the century on, children were put directly into mainstream classes and forced to sink or swim. This caused much stress and hardship...but those who survived became bilingual in their home language and in English" (Grosjean, 1982, p. 178). Grosjean's text contains an interesting discussion of the "sink or swim" phenomenon (Grosjean, 1982, p. 208), which applies with equal validity to the Russian Jewish community even though some children are sent to private Jewish day schools.

In school and through television, the children are exposed to the new language and quickly learn English. At this point they are partly to fully competent simultaneously in two languages. At this stage the child has just acquired the gift of bilingualism, usually with very little effort. This is the emergence of bilingualism.

THE THREE STAGES OF BILINGUALISM

The first stage—the *initial absorption of English*—occurs immediately after the acquisition of the new language. In this stage the two languages are mixed in the child's mind and speech. There is no preference yet for conceptual expression, and this stage is characterized by haphazard pairing of English and native word choice, sentence structure, and conjugation of verbs.

In the second stage—*preference for English*—the child becomes almost overwhelmed by the strength of the new language and expresses a preference to use that language all the time. It is much easier for the child to speak English, to the point where English becomes the child's natural language and speaking the native language requires greater effort. It is at this stage, which takes place anywhere from three months to a year or more after the child's first exposure to English, that the child's bilingual abilities are in jeopardy.

There are two possibilities for the resultant third stage of bilingualism—*either loss of the native language or emergence as a bilingual adult*—which are contingent upon the family's resolution of the critical second stage. One possible way that the parents can respond to the child's preference for English in the second stage is to give in to the child's demands. The parents may begin by allowing the child to speak to them in English instead of insisting that the child use his or her native language at home. Gradually, they may even start responding to the child in English so that he or she may better understand them. In the short run, this seems to facilitate communication and it often easier to give in, as described below.

In trying to establish or maintain bilingualism in a family, the parents may at certain times become discouraged and be tempted to abandon the attempts. Such discouragement may come from outside the family (e.g., teachers...) or from within the family itself, e.g., through conflict caused by the parents unrealistically expecting the child to be not only bilingual but equally proficient in both languages (Saunders, 1983, p. 138).

However, the second possibility is that the parents firmly deny the child permission to speak English at home, thereby ensuring the maintenance of the native language. If the parents continue to be firm as the child grows older, then the child emerges from this stage a fully bilingual adult. It is this

alternative third stage—*active bilingualism*—that is the main factor in determining the conflicts and advantages arising from bilingualism. The following two sections discuss this alternative with reference to the events that occur during active bilingualism.

CONFLICTS ARISING FROM BILINGUALISM

Although active bilingualism can lead to the child becoming a bilingual adult, this stage is neither easy for the child nor the family.

The conflicts that may arise in this stage occur mainly in two arenas: the familial and the social. In the family, the child comes into conflict with parents, first as they suppress his or her desire to speak English, and later as the child struggles to express him- or herself to them in the native language while that language becomes harder to speak. In some cases, the child may simply refuse to speak the native language or may constantly try to sneak in English words or phrases constructed in the English pattern.

The rift between the elderly and the young generation in the family is also aggravated by the language barrier. Grandchildren often refuse to speak in the native language to the older members of the family who have not learned English. This creates a new rift between family members, which is particularly difficult for a family that has just survived the immigration process together. In the Russian Jewish immigrant community this rift is especially difficult for grandparents because they are used to playing a very important role in the family and in child raising. It also causes additional frustration for the elderly who see their authority and comfort diminish with their inability to communicate.

In addition, children's interaction with adults may be influenced by language. They may selectively interact with those adults who allow them to speak English, rather than with those who attempt to en-

sure that they retain their native language. One example is found in the authors' family. Ida's grandchildren, Julie and Michael, are allowed to speak English to her husband and her, but not to their paternal grandparents, who both speak English but feel very strongly that the children must keep their Russian. Julie once confided to Ida that Michael "loves to be with Ida and Vladimir more than with the other grandparents" because he is allowed to speak English in their household.

Language conflicts can also be exacerbated in families with adolescents who use them as a weapon of rebellion. Such conflicts can add to other problems in families with a history of difficult relationships. In both cases, adolescents may categorically refuse to speak their native language.

Conflicts may also arise in the social arena, as described below.

Unfortunately, bilingual children in probably any bilingual situation will be exposed at times to even overt hostility from people who (usually monolingual themselves) are so intolerant that they cannot bear a language other than the majority language being spoken in their presence, even if the people speaking the other language are engaged in a completely private conversation (Saunders, 1983, p. 113).

Bilingual children may also face some conflict with English-speaking peers, since differences from them are only heightened by use of a different language. Children who finally master English are often embarrassed to admit their origins and may hide the fact that they are immigrants at all costs. When they must address their parents in front of their American friends, they do so in English. If they have to call home from school, they call in English. For example, when Sonia was in high school and had to call home from school, she spoke in English. Ida always corrected her, saying in Russian, "Speak Russian!" It was only years later that Sonia told her parents how

embarrassing it had been for her to have to switch to Russian in front of her peers.

Immigrant children are especially anxious to fit in quickly to their new society, and as the third stage progresses, they only very gradually begin to gain pride in their unique heritage and the additional advantage of bilingualism. It is important for parents and children to recognize this potential conflict and to reach a compromise so that it may be lessened. For example, the parents might allow the child to speak English to them and respond in English only if there is an English-speaking friend present. At the very least, all of the members of the family should be aware of the potential conflicts that may develop at this stage.

THE ADVANTAGES OF BILINGUALISM

Children who pass through the third stage successfully emerge from it feeling very proud and excited about their language abilities. In some cases, they can receive college credit for this knowledge of Russian. They are also more likely to become interested in their culture and roots and in the language itself and may desire to study them further. They are also likely to be more open about their heritage and to share it with their friends. Bilingualism is an asset in many professions as well.

Families that maintain bilingualism are generally closer than families that do not. For example, in one family from the FSU, one child was born in the United States, and the other one came to the United States at a very young age. Both children quickly moved to stage two of bilingualism where they expressed a preference to speak English. The mother was able to learn English quickly, and so she gave in to this demand, allowing the children to speak English to her. In turn she answered them in English. As a result, the children have almost completely lost their Russian. The price of this loss has been a change in the nature of their communication because the mother cannot express herself as well in English as she can in Russian. Thus, cer-

tain key phrases or jokes are lost, and conversation is necessarily limited. On the other hand, if the children were bilingual, then there would be much better communication.

Even more importantly, bilingual children adults usually become closer to their parents, since they have a special means of communication and because they provide a link to their past. The parents, in turn, become dependent on their children to help them master English, and thus they become an important link to their American future.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

In this article, we have focused on the stages of language acquisition and the importance of maintaining bilingualism in immigrant children. Other important issues remain for both immigrant families and professionals involved in providing services to such families.

For example, families may face difficulties in dealing with the various stages of bilingualism. One interesting issue to examine further is how siblings affect the maintenance of bilingualism and how language conflict is played out in sibling relationships. Another important familial issue is

the impact of bilingualism in families that arrive in two or more stages, separated by a number of years. On the social level, further study should also be done on the educational and social development of bilingual children in comparison to both their non-bilingual counterparts and to American children.

The successful transition from immigrant child to bilingual adult depends in large part on the family. It is only through everyone's hard work, the child's adaptation to embarrassments, and perseverance and understanding on all sides that the child may emerge from these three stages with the full benefits of bilingualism.

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