

# Is Weinreich Right? : Using A Critical Discourse Analysis To Study The Validity of Weinreich's Theory on Bilingual Types.

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## Background

The other year when reading Suzanne Romaine's book *Bilingualism* I became intrigued by Weinreich's classification system of bilingual types. Although I was unable to find any firsthand works by Weinreich, based on Suzanne Romaine's description of bilingual types there appears to be an element of truth to his theory: bilinguals can be classified into three types based on how they store languages in the brain, which, in turn, is dependent on how they acquired these languages. The three bilingual types Weinreich mentions are: 1.) coordinate bilinguals who store the languages in separate parts of the brain and can readily differentiate between the languages, 2.) compound bilinguals who store their languages in the same part of the brain and tend to mix their languages, and 3.) subcoordinate bilinguals who interpret the weaker of the two languages through the dominant language.

One drawback on much research in this field to date is that many researchers tend to focus on time-specific cross-sections in the learners' language development. In these case studies what unfortunately gets omitted is how language development evolves over time. Thus, a child who may demonstrate the traits of a coordinate bilingual at one time could appear as a compound bilingual at a completely different time, and what may seem to be a compound bilingual at one time may later demonstrate traits of a subcoordinate bilingual at yet another stage, and so on.

Thus, what we may be observing is not a neurological experience as implied by Weinreich, but an environmentally-dictated experience, based on factors such as the dominant language to which the child is exposed, the balance between exposure to the two languages, the degree of separation of the two language environments,

and the length of time spent in any given linguistic environment. For example, there could be specific thresholds when the bilingual child transcends from one bilingual type to another, or may even appear to regress in some incidents.

One interesting point of Weinreich's theory is its attempt to address the diversity of childhood bilingualism. He stands in direct contrast to most researchers who attempt to form universal laws applicable to all bilinguals, whether it is Brigham, Goddard, or Goodenough attempting to show how bilingualism retards the brain (Hakuta p.20-22 Romaine p.109), or whether it is Lambert and Peal attempting to show how bilingualism makes the brain more flexible (Hakuta p.34-35 Romaine p.115), or whether it is the commonly held view that childhood bilinguals do not separate their languages until 3 years of age (Romaine p.206), which has repeatedly been proven to be not the case in many incidents such as Imedadze who recorded separation at 1.8 years (Romaine p.206), and so on.

One pitfall many researchers fall into is over-generalization. Romaine warns against this tendency:

Given the diversity of the contexts in which children acquire language(s), it is not easy to extrapolate from the studies which have been done, what the 'normal' sequence of development might be for a child growing up in very different circumstances from those which have been studied. (Romaine, *Bilingualism*, p.181)

At this point, I will admit one weakness I have in regard to my field of study: I am not a neurolinguist. Therefore, I am not qualified to determine whether Weinreich's theory of how language is stored in different parts of the brain holds true from a neurological perspective. However, from an observationist perspective, I am qualified. From such a perspective, I wish to

challenge Weinreich's classification system.

Last year I did a critical discourse analysis of a conversation I had with my daughter while going for a drive in the family car (Meyerhoff, 2000). At that point, my daughter demonstrated the traits of a perfect compound bilingual; she would freely shift from one language to the other, depending on to whom she was speaking, with almost no mixing of the languages. However, this year I conducted another critical discourse analysis in which my daughter seems to have regressed from being a perfect compound bilingual to a sub-coordinate bilingual in which she interprets English, her weaker language, through Japanese, her stronger language. Could it be that she is losing her ability to produce English utterances, although she is quite able to understand what is spoken to her? Or is it simply more convenient for her to converse in Japanese? Or perhaps, is it a little of both?

### Script.

The following cassette recording was made on Sunday April 23, 2000 while Aysha and I played on a beach near Sasebo city in Nagasaki prefecture.

Subject: Aysha Meyerhoff.

Speakers: Aysha Meyerhoff, and her father, Andrew Meyerhoff.

Time: Between 2:00 and 2:30 pm, April 23, 2000.

Location: Shirhama beach on the outskirts of Sasebo city, Nagasaki prefecture.

Aysha: Nani ga yogoritta kana?

Daddy: What's that?

Aysha: Nani ga yogoritta kana?

Daddy: What's dirty?

Aysha: Mm. (positive Japanese acknowledgement).

Daddy: How old do you think that girl is, Aysha?

Aysha: Shira nai.

Daddy: What's that?

Aysha: I dont konw.

Daddy: I dont konw either.

Aysha: Daddy, kono gurai oki sa jellyfish to ittara do suru?

Daddy: A jellyfish that big?

Aysha: Yep.

Daddy: What would I do?

Aysha: Yep.

Daddy: I would swim away from it.

Aysha: Kono gurai dattara... sugoi Oookina kurage... Kono Oookina kurage...

Daddy: Maybe it would eat me.

Aysha: Kono gurai Oookina kurage... kono gurai... ne, ne... koyatte kitte... osaru-san to onaji oki sa gurai... koyatte natte... kono katachi purple no kurage... purple na jellyfish... okay... purple na jellyfish desu te.

Daddy: If I saw a jellyfish, I don't know what I would do.

Aysha: Oooki desu.

### Analysis.

This script is fairly indicative of Aysha's language production at this time. She speaks with her mother in only Japanese. Although her father speaks to her in only English, she responds to her father predominantly in Japanese, too. Except for limited time with her father, she has no chance to use English on a daily-basis; she plays with Japanese-speaking friends and cousins, she watches Japanese videos, and interacts with Japanese-speaking relatives. Time spent with her father is restricted to only an hour or two most evenings and time spent with the family on the weekends. Thus, it can be seen that her exposure to Japanese is much greater than her exposure to English.

However, the same was true eight months earlier when the family took a day-trip to Mongul-mura in Saga prefecture and Aysha appeared to be a perfect coordinate bilingual, switching between her two tongues with no difficulty (see Meyerhoff, 2000). At this point, she had been in a Japanese-dominant environment for nearly a year without any aversion to English. Unfortunately, in the next eight months her production of English utterances would become quite limited.

What could be the reason for such a drop? Did she actually lose her ability to produce English utterances? Or did she simply chose not to converse in English because Japanese was easier and a more convenient mode for communication? I believe it was probably a little of both. Constant use of Japanese obviously reinforced her speaking skills in that language. In other incidents around this same time, though, Aysha acknowledged that she deliberately chose Japanese as her mode of communication because of convenience: "Kore wa Nihon desu. Sore kara Nihongo shaburimasu

('This is Japan ; therefore, I speak Japanese')" (April, 2000), or "Iie Eigo wasurettanai, dakedo Nihon de Nihongo shaburimasu ('No, I didn't forget English, but in Japan, I speak Japanese')" (April, 2000).

Aysha is probably speaking the truth in the above statements. Obviously, she feels more comfortable to speak Japanese at this time.

Although her English production skills dropped at this point, she was still able to maintain her English comprehension skills, which corresponds with Magiste's finding that receptive skills excel beyond productive skills (Romaine p.93). This finding seems to hold true even in cases in which productive skills have been lost. Of course, it is open to debate as to whether the productive skills have been lost, or simply impeded through lack of use.

## Conclusion.

In light of Weinreich's classification system of bilingual types. I would agree that his system is helpful in describing stages in bilingual types. Since first purporting his theory of bilingual types in 1968, most researchers have disregarded his work, or even gone to great strides to refute his claims. I, too, have trouble with accepting the idea that bilinguals can neatly fit into three classifications of coordinate, compound, or subcoordinate.

Indeed, the same individual can display qualities of coordinate, compound, or subcoordinate at different stages in their language development. I am not a neurolinguistics, so I am not qualified to make assertions in this field. However, how does one justify the bilingual who keeps going back and forth between coordinate, compound, and subcoordinate stages depending on language environment? Is such an individual constantly juggling and shifting the storage of language in the brain? I do not have an adequate answer. This may prove of more interest to an actual

neurolinguist.

Now that I have shown some skepticism towards Weinreich's theories, I would like to draw some positive attention to Weinreich's classification system. One area of possible future research, based on Weinreich's system, could be to find the actual threshold at which one bilingual type suddenly assumes the attributes of another bilingual type, or to determine whether change is more gradual? As mentioned, these are questions for future researchers to answer.

However, Weinreich's classification system is useful when monitoring language development over time. It is also useful when studying the relationship between language production and language environment. Furthermore, his system may prove of interest to neurolinguists. In conclusion, I would like to urge researchers not to abandon Weinreich's classification system altogether because of seeming weaknesses associated with it. We must be willing to extract the good from Weinreich's work and build upon it. Indeed, his classification system may prove worthy yet.

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