

Bogdan Krakowian

UNIDIRECTIONAL BILINGUALISM¹

The term "Unidirectional bilingualism" will be used here to denote the ability to function as a recipient of spoken messages - the definition can be extended to cover written messages as well - in a language other than the native.

This phenomenon can most often be observed in children whose parents speak two different languages. In such a situation the children can either become fully bilingual or they can become partly bilingual, which means that they can function both receptively and productively in the dominant language - usually the language of the country of their stay - but only receptively in the other language. In short, the latter children will be able to understand what is spoken to them but will be unable to speak the language which is not the language of the country, or their first or native language.

Unidirectional bilingualism can often be observed among the children of immigrants. The author knows, for example, many Polish families living in Britain whose children cannot speak Polish although this language is sometimes used by both parents at home.

Children can also develop unidirectional bilingualism in artificial conditions, for example, when one of the parents insists on using a foreign language in dealing with his or her children.

When my daughter was born I decided that I should use English when speaking to her, hoping that she would be able to

¹ This is a slightly modified version of a paper delivered at the Third Overseas Conference of IATEEL and MLA of Poland held at Poznań in April 1979.

learn both Polish and English the easy way, without the enormous amount of effort necessary in learning a foreign language at a later age. Since that time, nine years ago, my daughter has heard only English from me. All the other members of the household - my wife and the son who is three years older than the daughter - speak Polish. In my dealings with them I also use Polish. The rule was that I should use English only when directly speaking to the daughter.

During the first year of her life I was not able to observe anything extraordinary in her development. She was perhaps a little late with her first verbalizations, which were in Polish, when compared with her brother. This could have been an accident or it could have resulted from the fact that she was learning two languages at the same time. It must be mentioned, however, that the daughter's exposition to Polish was reduced when compared with that of the boy's because I did not speak Polish to her, and I used to speak quite a lot to the boy when he was a baby.

The daughter demonstrated her understanding of English approximately at the age of one year. At that time she obeyed simple commands given in English. I discovered, however, that in her understanding she relied heavily on paralinguistic information (for example, gestures accompanying the commands). Very soon, however, she passed from this stage to the next in which she paid greater attention to the words themselves. This was tested with commands which were not accompanied by any gestures.

The next stage in her development started when she learned to translate sentences from English into Polish. She could be made to do it when she was about three years old. She was never taught how she should translate but, nevertheless, she could do it quite effectively. The way she was trained to do it was with directed commands, like:

"Go to Mummy and ask her what she is going to cook for dinner",

"Tell your brother to come and talk to me".

Listening to her translations I noticed that the girl had no difficulties with the structure of the bits of language that she had to handle but she had, on occasion, difficulties with

some vocabulary items. In such cases she used one of two strategies: she either came back to me asking for explanation or she translated the unknown vocabulary item as she thought appropriate in the context. She used the former strategy less often than the latter, mainly, I think, because she had difficulties in remembering and repeating the new English words to me. Her translations of the unknown words were sometimes more, sometimes less adequate, but this means that I only learned that she did not know a word when she failed to translate it correctly; when her guess was right I assumed that the word was not new to her.

When the daughter was four I thought it was time to help her to make verbalizations in English. For this purpose I used another version of directed commands; this time she was not to translate from English into Polish but she had to ask me questions or tell me things in English. This exercise had the following form:

"Kate, please ask me what time it is".

"Say: «What's the time?»"

"Kate, tell me that you love me".

"Say: «I love you, Daddy»".

In this way a number of sentences had been rehearsed and she can produce them when required. She can say how old she is, where she lives, where she goes to school, etc.

The interesting (and distressing) thing is, however, that she has practically never produced anything spontaneously, not even the rehearsed sentences. Whenever I address her, she answers in Polish; when she is in good mood she can give monosyllabic answers in English, when this is insisted upon.

The extraordinary thing is that she cannot remember English words a moment after I use them in speaking to her. If, for example, I tell her to fetch me a spoon from the kitchen, she will go and bring one but when asked, immediately after that, to give the English word for spoon she cannot remember it!

At the age of seven, I started reading simple stories to her and she has enjoyed this very much. She likes listening to the same story over and over again. I use various simplified stories, usually the ones contained in M. West's "New Method Read-

er". Kate does not always understand all the words - I often checked her understanding of the more difficult words by asking her to translate them - but this does not stop her from enjoying and comprehending the whole of the story. She can make a summary of the story in Polish to her mother or brother. She sometimes even cried if the story was particularly sad.

It is difficult to estimate how much English she really understands. The kind of language that I used with her was the register of every day life. She has no difficulty with understanding this variety of English. I also made an informal test whose aim it was to discover how large her vocabulary was using a picture dictionary². I opened it at random and asked Kate to tell me the meanings of the words on each page. It appeared that she knew, on the average, three words per page. There are 357 pages in this dictionary, which gives the total of 1071 words. This is not a very precise estimate considering the way in which it was made, and the fact that it is difficult to specify precisely what it means to know a word, but perhaps it is not very far from the truth. Another way of estimating her vocabulary range is with the help of West's simplified stories. Kate easily understands the first two books, which means that she must know at least 761 words - that is where Book II leaves off. In the book for step III there are some stories which she can hardly be expected to appreciate, for example, *The Man Who Discovered the Sea Way to India* or *Travels of Marco Polo*. As was to be expected, she refused to listen to these stories saying that they were uninteresting. She, however, enjoyed listening to the story of *The Ugly Duckling*, which is in the same book. This may show that it is not necessarily the vocabulary that makes the understanding of some of the texts difficult for her but rather their contents. Book III introduces 1072 vocabulary items, and so it is, perhaps, correct to assume that Kate may know about 1000 of the most useful English words.

Quite recently I observed some signs which might be heralding the onset of spontaneous speech. On occasion Kate gives short answers to questions in English and she can also trans-

² D. Whitman, *World Wonder Dictionary*, New York, Toronto, London 1966.

late some simple and short sentences from Polish into English, when specifically asked to do so. It is possible to observe that she is developing some kind of approximative system of her own but there is not enough material to investigate it.

So far I have been concentrating on my daughter's progress in English and I have not mentioned my son. The fact is that I did not try to teach him any English until quite recently, when I discovered that he managed to learn nearly as much as the daughter, and in some respects even more, simply by listening to me talking to his sister. Although his vocabulary may be a little more limited than that of his sister, he can use the language spontaneously, he can make himself understood, and he can easily interact with speakers of English. His bilingualism is, therefore, not unidirectional. Of course, he makes mistakes but he is fully communicative.

It is difficult to account for the different outcomes in learning English by each child without considering their individual motivation and attitude towards learning it. Kate has had some emotional outbursts which startled me. She cried and complained that other children had fathers who spoke Polish to them but her father did not, which was not fair. She said that she did not want to learn English and that I did not speak that language to her brother, which was also unfair. Fortunately, I succeeded in persuading her that it was necessary for her to learn English for she could go to England one day, meet nice people there, see some nice toy shops, etc. The boy, on the other hand, has always shown willingness to learn the language and to use it in communication.

I thought it should be very stimulating for the children if they met some English speaking people, and so I arranged for them to have conversation sessions with two American students. These meetings lasted for over half a year, with one, sometimes two sessions per week.

Przemek, the boy, learned a lot in this way and he enjoyed meeting the Americans. Kate refused to learn from them and she skipped the lessons whenever she could.

Another difference between the children concerns their reactions towards the things they hear in the foreign language.

As I mentioned earlier, Kate can enjoy a story without necessarily understanding all the words. Przemek always insists on understanding the meanings of nearly all of the unknown words. If there are too many of them and he has difficulties with understanding the story, he refuses to listen to it.

Unlike Kate, Przemek can produce quite long utterances in English, and he can even translate jokes from Polish into English, although, it is true, with some help in the matters of vocabulary (see Appendix). His approximative system can be easily analysed. Suffice it to say here that he follows definite rules in his speech production. One of the characteristic things is his disregarding tense and person markings as they are used in English. Instead, he has his own idiosyncratic markings. For example, he uses "been" to indicate past (he even formulated a rule to this effect in Polish, without being asked). He also used, on some other occasions, the modal "can" as an indication of the future tense.

The history of language learning by these two children has been presented in the hope that the accumulation of data from the study of such individual cases could lead to some interesting conclusions about foreign/second language learning. What conclusions could, for example, be drawn from the case of these two children?

First, we should not underestimate the importance of psychological factors in the process of learning a foreign language. Kate does not speak English, she cannot remember English words soon after she hears them because she must have developed some sort of emotional blockage which prevents her from speaking. This may have something to do with the necessity for group identification with the people speaking Polish. She also does not want to learn English because she has no need to communicate in that language. I accept her Polish and, therefore, she is not forced to use English. On the other hand, Przemek is well motivated to learn and his learning is more effective. From the very beginning Przemek was placed in a psychologically different situation. He was always an observer, he had no problems with group identification. His relationship with the father was not hampered by another language. He "cracked" the code of

English as he would solve a puzzle: intellectually, without being too involved emotionally.

It is possible to argue that Kate has not had enough exposure to English. First, she was nearly exclusively exposed to my kind of idiosyncratic dialect, second, the amount of time I managed to spend talking to her would be roughly equivalent to the amount of listening time of a two-year-old child. Przemek, however managed to learn to speak with the same amount of listening time. The fact might also indicate that claims made by people like Postovsky³ who believe that in teaching a foreign language the learners should not be required to produce language before their memory stores are filled with the foreign language are very likely to be true.

APPENDIX

The text below is a joke translated by Przemek from Polish. The italicized words are the ones he did not know and had to be helped with. The word marked with * was mispronounced. The question mark in parentheses denotes hesitation.

"One day in lesson *biology teacher take from window fly. She put it in a test tube and she blew smoke from cigarette. Fly in one minute been dead. To another test tube she also put a fly and she put the alcohol. In one minute fly was dead. Teacher ask children what she (?) they know from this lesson? One boy stand up and say the alcohol is bad and the smoke also. Teacher ask the children what they know from this lesson (?)... (What he wanted to say was «What else...») Teacher ask the children what they know also from this lesson?

One boy stand up and say: «Who drink and smoke he don't have germs »" (In Polish: "Kto pije i pali, ten nie ma robali").

Institute of English Philology
Department of Applied Linguistics
University of Łódź

³ V. A. Postovsky, *The Priority of Aural Comprehension in the Language Acquisition Process* (a paper delivered at the 4th AILA World Congress in Stuttgart in August 1975).

*Bogdan Krakowian***BILINGWIZM JEDNOKIERUNKOWY**

W pracy niniejszej opisano swego rodzaju eksperyment naturalny podjęty z dwojgiem dzieci autora (obecnie dziewczynka ma 9 lat, a chłopiec 12), celem którego było przekonać się, czy uda się je nauczyć mówić w języku angielskim jeżeli jedno z rodziców (ojciec) będzie używało tego języka przy zwracaniu się do dzieci. W tym konkretnym przypadku ojciec mówił po angielsku tylko do córki, cały czas od chwili jej urodzenia. Syn jedynie przysłuchiwał się "rozmowie" w obcym języku. Rezultat eksperymentu po dziewięciu latach jest taki, że dziewczynka rozumie w zasadzie wszystko, co do niej się mówi po angielsku, a chłopiec potrafi także mówić i porozumiewać się.

Autor zastanawia się nad przyczynami takiego rezultatu i wyraża przekonanie, że zbieranie tego rodzaju opisów może pomóc w wyciąganiu wniosków na temat uczenia się języka obcego.