

Giving children a double inheritance: Promoting early bilingualism one to one

It's a wonderful thing when a child knows two languages from an early age. There is a wide range of benefits. Research has shown that hearing and using two languages from an early age stimulates the brain neurons and gives the bilingual child a range of cognitive advantages. These include being better at multitasking logical thinking. There are also health advantages. People who are bilingual from an early age have delayed onset of dementia. A study showed that among such bilinguals, the symptoms of dementia appeared on average four years later than among monolinguals.

Being bilingual also gives social advantages. The bilingual can be an insider in two different social groups. A common pattern is that one of the languages is the ethnic language of one or both parents, whereas the other language is a national language. Knowing both these languages fluently helps the individual have a solid sense of identity. Their knowledge of their ethnic language roots them in the culture and traditions and social network of that ethnic group, whereas their fluency in the national language helps them in education, job-seeking and enjoying all the benefits of being a citizen of their country.

In the last couple of centuries, such early bilingualism has been an ordinary fact of life for hundreds of millions of children all around the world. With the establishment of national education systems and mass media in every country on earth, nowadays less and less children are isolated in the monolingualism in a minority language and cut off from the opportunities that go with knowing a language of wider communication. Most countries are multi-ethnic and the increase of bilingualism all around the world in the last few centuries has played a major part in building mutual understanding between ethnic groups and nations, leading up to the globalized world of today.

Yet nowadays many countries are experiencing a worrying trend in the opposite direction with a rise of monolingualism and a decrease in bilingualism. While there are many factors influencing this, in many communities the main cause is the decision of parents not to speak their mother tongue to their children, but to speak to them only in the national language. Because the national language has higher prestige than the mother tongue, and is the language used in education, the parents think it will be better for their children's future if they help them speak the national language as their first language. As a result, more and more children have only passive knowledge of their parents' mother tongue, and are no longer bilingual. They miss out on the benefits of being full bilinguals. The sad thing is that the parents think that what they are doing will be good for their child, whereas actually they are depriving them. Instead of being fluent in two languages from a young age, they are only fluent in one. Instead of getting the cognitive, health and social benefits of being fully bilingual, they are being deprived of their full inheritance and only allowed to be monolingual. If I ask such parents whether they regret that their own parents spoke to them in the local language, they never regret it. Whereas when I ask children whose parents only spoke to them in the national language, they often regret that they can't speak their ancestral ethnic language.

As more and more children are less able to speak the local language, and inter-generational transmission of the language is weakened, the language becomes threatened. As local people and outside linguists become aware of the threatened state of their language, various efforts may be undertaken to counter this trend. Some of the common steps taken are: teaching the local language as a subject in the schools, publishing books and dictionaries in the local language, promoting its use in the media, such as radio programs and CD's, holding seminars to promote the local language, and so on.

Whereas all these efforts are very positive, they don't directly address the main cause of the problem. They are not aimed at persuading parents to speak their native language to their children.

At this point, I'd like to stop talking in generalities and relate my personal experience in relation to these matters. My wife and I worked for more than fifteen years in a minority language community in Indonesia, and we witnessed all the factors mentioned above at work. When we first went there, most of the parents in the villages we visited were speaking Moronene to their children, and virtually of the children were bilingual in Moronene and Indonesian from a young age. However as the years passed, more and more parents spoke only Indonesian to their children. As concerned linguists, we got involved in many of the activities mentioned above to try to promote the local language: publishing books, radio broadcasts, promoting local music, seminars etc. It wasn't clear that any of it had much effect in persuading parents to speak Moronene to their children.

However recently I had a few encouraging experiences which have changed my perspective on what could be done to tackle this problem. I visited an ethnically mixed village which had the reputation that many of the Moronene people there didn't speak Moronene. I was staying with a friend and his brother Yanas came to the house with his three year old son. I noticed that Yanas spoke to his son in Moronene and the son replied in kind. I asked him, "Why aren't you following the trend and speaking Indonesian to your son?" Yanas replied that he had been persuaded by a conversation with a Moronene man named Edi in another village. Edi had told him that a few years before he had met me, and I had said to him, "Why are you so stingy that you are not giving your inheritance to your child?" This remark made Edi realize that he ought to speak Moronene to his child. And by telling the story he had passed on that conviction to Yanas. Yanas himself had persuaded a couple of his neighbours to speak Moronene to their children.

The next day I visited another Moronene village and dropped in to see my friend Sarman and his wife. On several earlier visits I had urged them to speak Moronene to their son, but each time I turned up again they were still using Indonesian. This time, however, Sarman told me that he'd switched to using Moronene. I was intrigued, thinking that it would be difficult to change one's habit and switch from one language to the other. Sarman told me that he transitioned by saying each sentence twice, once in Moronene and once in Indonesian.

These experiences crystallized the idea that the focus of efforts to encourage early bilingualism and thereby language revitalization ought to be one friend sharing with another friend as to why this was a good idea. It could be one village mother to

another, or one village father to another. It involves setting an example and giving some reasons.

An approach with this type of one on one communication as its main focus will have a number of advantages over other common approaches to language revitalization. (1) It does not depend on funding. (2) It does not depend on resources such as books, broadcasts, seminars etc. (3) It is carried out by the local people themselves. (4) It can spread naturally from one person to another. (5) It motivates parents by focusing on something close to every parent's heart: what is best for their child.

While this approach depends mainly on insiders, there could be a role for outside activists. And there could be a role for some simple resources.

Dan and Chip Heath in their book, *Switch: How to Change When Change is Hard*, suggest that one helpful approach is to “script the critical moves.” In the task of helping people change their habits in terms of what language they speak to their children, I'd suggest the critical moves be spelled out as follows:

- 1) Choose one or two children who live in your house or next door.
- 2) Determine to start speaking to them only in your mother tongue.
- 3) Choose one or two friends or relatives who have young children.
- 4) Urge them to speak to their children only in their mother tongue.
- 5) Meet regularly with your friend or relative and their and your children. Speak to them and the children in the mother tongue.