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Mobile Parents, Multilingual Children: Children's Production of Their Paternal Language in Trilingual Families

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This paper examines the language production of two young children exposed to three languages from infancy. The paper focuses on the children's production of their paternal languages, which are minority languages for both children. It concentrates on the children's choice of language with their fathers, and seeks reasons for these choices. The framework of the analysis is that of social interactionism, which emphasises the role of child-directed speech for certain aspects of language development (e.g. Barnes, *Child-Directed Speech*). The method consists of longitudinal case studies of the two children, each of which is growing up with frequent and intensive exposure to English, Swiss German and French. The analysis reveals the following factors to be of greatest relevance: the conversational styles of the fathers, certain language exposure patterns, in particular the presence or absence of the community language in the home, and input in the paternal language from friends and relatives.

1. Introduction

One feature of professional life in the twenty-first century is that people are increasingly "on the move." To a greater extent than in the past, both men and women are prepared – or expected – to relocate for their work. Not uncommonly, this relocation involves moving to a place in which a different language is spoken. Once ensconced in their new environments, such people do not, of course, only work; they also have personal lives. They make friends, they engage in romantic relationships, and they have children. Thus, in today's increasingly mobile professional

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world, it is not unusual for couples to form in which one person speaks Language A, the partner speaks Language B, and they live in an area in which Language C is spoken. These couples may communicate in Language A, B, C or even D – or any combination of these. If and when such couples start a family, their children will potentially be exposed to three or more languages. It is the language development of such children which is of interest in this paper.

2. Aim and scope

The present paper explores the language production of two young children, from two different families, who are growing up exposed to English, French and Swiss German in Switzerland. It focuses on the production of their paternal languages, which are minority languages for both children. The driving question is: what contextual factors favour the production of a non-dominant language in a setting of trilingual language acquisition? The paternal languages were chosen because these are minority languages for both children, as well as being the languages which are most comparable in terms of exposure patterns: both fathers are frequently away from home, the paternal language is not the language of the community, nor is it the language the parents use with each other. The research questions were:

1. To what extent do the children speak their paternal languages with their fathers?
2. How may paternal language input account for the children's production of their paternal languages?
3. How may other language input factors account for the children's production of their paternal languages?

3. Theoretical frame

The research is anchored in a framework of social interactionism, which theorises that child-caregiver interactions play an important role in language acquisition (e.g. Snow and Ferguson). In situations of bi- or multilingual acquisition, this includes how language code is negotiated in interaction (e.g. Döpke; Lanza). In addition to interactions, relatively fixed factors concerning language input, such as the proportions of the different languages each child is exposed to (see e.g. De Houwer, *Bilingual First Language Acquisition*), were examined. These factors were drawn from previous work on multilingual language acquisition (see Section 4).

Thus, both dynamic and more stable aspects of language input were taken into account.

4. Previous work

The research falls into the small but burgeoning field of trilingual language acquisition (see Quay, *Managing Linguistic Boundaries* and *Introduction* for overviews). Within this field, a number of studies provide information relevant to the question of the extent to which young children growing up trilingually speak their paternal languages. Note that here we are only concerned with situations in which the paternal language is not the community language, since in the latter case the issue of trying to maintain the paternal language is (normally) superfluous. In the study by Barnes (*Early Trilingualism*), for example, in which Basque was both the paternal language and the community language, the question of whether or not the child would speak Basque was not an issue. Where the paternal language is not the community language, language maintenance often does become an issue. Kazzazi (69), in a study concerned with children growing up with English (mother), Farsi (father) and German (community language), showed how Farsi could be kept alive via an Iranian social network in Germany, and trips to relatives in Iran. Both Wang and Quay (*Dinner Conversations*) discuss affective reasons for the children's production of their paternal languages. Wang (62–63), whose subjects were growing up with Chinese (mother), French (father) and English (community language), states that the father's intensive style of play and interaction contributed to her sons' production of French in the United States. Quay notes that her two-year-old subject, growing up with Chinese (mother), English (father) and Japanese (community language) maintained English speaking skills, despite the fact that, according to parental estimates, only one-fifth of her language input was in English. This, Quay suggests, was in part due to the "close bond" (*Dinner Conversations* 30) between the father and child. Montanari, on the other hand, discusses why her subject may have produced less of her paternal language with her father (and maternal grandmother) than her maternal language with her mother and the community language with the investigator. She explains that in the case of her young subject, growing up with Tagalog (mother), Spanish (father) and English (community language), the paternal language may have been perceived by the child "as the 'most' minority language" (121). While the child had intensive exposure to (virtually) monolingual speakers of Tagalog (maternal grandparents) and English (day care staff, sister), the Spanish-speakers (father and paternal grandmother) "were observed to switch to English,

not only to address other family members, including their own spouses, but also to interact with each other" (121). Thus, the child probably felt it was appropriate to use English with her father, even though he spoke Spanish to her.

More general information on the question concerning the production of all three languages is to be gained from two surveys on multilingual families. De Houwer analysed questionnaire data of 244 trilingual families in Flanders and found that children had a higher chance of speaking all three languages if neither parent used the community language at home (the community language may or may not have been one of the native languages of a parent). In a different survey, Braun and Cline interviewed 35 multilingual families in England and 35 in Germany. They found that one constellation particularly favoured the promotion of multilingualism, namely when each parent had just one different native language, neither of which was the community language.

5. Methodology and data

As in most of the studies described above, the method of investigation is that of the case study. In a framework of social interactionism, longitudinal, holistic case studies are vital tools for the analysis of language development (see e.g. Lanza).

The first family which took part in the study lives in German-speaking Switzerland. In this family, the target child, Lina (all names are pseudonyms), is growing up with a Swiss mother who speaks a Bernese variety of Swiss German to her and a Belgian father who speaks French to her (he himself is bilingual in French and Dutch). Lina's parents speak English to each other. Lina has thus been exposed to all three languages regularly from birth. The mother's English is clearly Swiss German-influenced, while the father speaks a variety of southern British English with a slight non-native accent. Besides the conversation of her parents, Lina has further exposure to English via her American aunt. The aunt and family lived together in the same house for two months when Lina was one and a half, and since that time the aunt has lived close by. With regard to Swiss German input, the mother is at home full-time, and Lina also goes to a local playgroup two afternoons a week. Where French is concerned, the father works outside the home five to six days a week but happened to be at home full-time during the first six months of the case study due to a period of unemployment. With respect to English, Lina hears this language frequently via her parents' conversation, and interacts in English about twice a week, when her aunt comes to visit.

In the second family, the target child, Elliot, has a Swiss father who speaks to him in a Basel dialect,[1] and an English mother (raised in South Africa) who addresses him in English. The family lives in French-speaking Switzerland and Elliot attended French-language day care three days a week from the age of seven months until the age of three years. Elliot has thus been exposed to two languages regularly from birth, and a third language from before the age of onset of speech (see Quay, *Managing Linguistic Boundaries* 180, on onset of speech as a possible cut-off point for the definition of "trilingual first language acquisition"). Elliot also has an older brother who attends the bilingual stream in his school (French and English). Elliot's input in English and French during the case study was relatively even since on the two weekdays that he did not attend day care he was looked after by his English-speaking mother. His input in Swiss German was considerably smaller since Elliot's father is completely away from home during the week, working in another part of the country, and only sees his son on weekends and holidays. The child does, however, have additional exposure to Swiss German via his paternal grandmother, who visits once a month and stays for several days at a time when the mother is away on business. An overview of the language constellations in the two families can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Language exposure patterns, Lina's family

Source of exposure	Language
Mother → Child	Swiss German
Father → Child	French
Mother ↔ Father	English
Local language	Swiss German
Day care (two half-days)	Swiss German
Aunt	English

[1] The father's variety also contains elements from dialects of other regions where he has worked, namely Aargau, St Gallen, Schwyz and Zurich.

Table 2: Language exposure patterns, Elliot's family

Source of exposure	Language
Mother → Child	English
Father → Child	Swiss German
Mother ↔ Father	English
Local language	French
Day care (three full days)	French

With regard to the data collection, the parents agreed to record their children regularly once a month for a year, from just after the children's second to just after their third birthday. The longitudinal design of the study was considered essential for the investigation of the development of their three languages. In addition, since I remained in regular contact with the families after the recordings were made, I was also able to ask them whether they could make any further sets of recordings. Both families made a set once again a year later, just after the children's fourth birthday. Lina's family also made one in between, when Lina was three and a half. In this paper, the results and analyses only refer to the original or "main" data set of the first year of the study.

The families were asked to make half hour recordings of their usual interactions with their child. Everyday interactions were considered the best way to obtain natural child-caregiver interaction – the main setting in which Western children actually learn language.[2] The recordings thus consist of various activities: playing, book-reading, mealtimes, getting ready for bed routines, and so on. Although no instructions were given in terms of activities, the parents were asked to make recordings of four different constellations: child + mother, child + father, child + both parents, child + person who spoke the third language (who was well known to the child). In Lina's case, the person providing the third language was her American aunt, in Elliot's, a French-speaking babysitter. These recordings were transcribed following the CHAT (Codes for the Human Analysis of Transcription) system (MacWhinney). In the examples in this paper, however, the transcriptions have been modified for

[2] This is apparently not a universal in child language acquisition. Ochs and Schieffelin (78) report on two communities, traditional Western Samoan communities and the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, where infants and small children are not considered conversational partners, and are not usually addressed specifically; rather, young children acquire language by overhearing conversations of older people.

the sake of readability. Besides these recordings, informal interviews and observational visits were regularly made to both families.

6. Results

This section provides quantitative results concerning the first and second research questions. The first research question was: To what extent do the children speak their paternal languages with their fathers? In order to answer this, all the children's utterances were coded for language. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of utterances the children produce in their paternal language when in conversation with their fathers.[3] Note that in this table only utterances produced exclusively in English, French or Swiss German are represented (i.e. unintelligible, mixed and ambiguous utterances are not included here). We see that when comparing the number of utterances produced in one of the three languages, Elliot produces 1,143/1,240 utterances in his father's language (92%), while Lina produces only 108/819 in her father's (13%).

Table 3: Utterances in paternal language when in conversation with father

Child	Number	%
Elliot	1,143/1,240	92
Lina	108/819	13

The second research question was: How may paternal language input account for the children's production of their paternal languages? Here, quantitative results concerning the consistency of the fathers in speaking their native languages with their children are given. Further aspects of this question will be treated in Section 7. In both families, there is a big commitment to the *one person, one language* principle (Ronjat 4), which maintains that parents in bi- or multilingual families should consistently speak their own language to the child. Table 4 shows the number and percentage of each father's conversational turns exclusively in their na-

[3] As in classic studies of bilingual child language acquisition (De Houwer, *The Acquisition of Two Languages*; Lanza), the utterance was determined according to intonational contour. A segment of speech was considered an utterance whenever there was a terminal intonation contour. The three types of terminal contour were final (marked by a period), appealing (marked by a question mark) and exclamatory (marked by an exclamation mark). The two main reference works used for intonation were Botinis, Granström and Möbius, and Cruttenden.

tive language. Note that the results from the recordings shown in this table also match the behaviour that I observed on visits to the families.

Table 4: Turns of fathers exclusively in native language

Father of	Number	%
Lina	876/983	89
Elliot	1,607/1,664	97

We see that Lina's father is slightly less consistent than Elliot's, although with a rate of 89% of his turns exclusively in French still fairly consistent.

7. Analysis

How can we account for this very great difference in production between the two children? Both fathers are in a similar situation, and we have just seen that both usually use their native languages with their children. Moreover, since Lina's father, unlike Elliot's, always lives at home, Lina actually has more exposure to her paternal language than Elliot does. In what follows, I examine both interactional and other language input factors in order to explain these very different results.

7.1. Paternal input: Overall consistency

In connection with the results concerning the caregivers' consistency (see Table 4), I would like to consider two observations about adherence to the one person, one language strategy made by De Houwer and Cruz-Ferreira. De Houwer cautions that "a 1P/1L setting may be an ideal rather than 100% reality" (*Bilingual First Language Acquisition* 113), while Cruz-Ferreira states: "It is, I would argue, impossible not to mix in a multilingual environment" (20) – and of course a trilingual family situation is very much a multilingual environment. In the light of these observations, the consistency of the caregivers is noteworthy. Nevertheless, the lower rate of consistency displayed by Lina's father may have consequences on Lina's perception of how acceptable it is for her to use a non-paternal language. This, among other things, will be discussed in Section 7.2.

7.2. Paternal input: Conversational style

Following Lanza's model of "parental discourse strategies" (Ch. 6), I examined all instances of how Lina's and Elliot's fathers reacted when their children spoke to them in a non-paternal language. The results, which are presented and discussed in detail elsewhere (see Chevalier), reveal that Elliot's father had a didactic conversational style and to a certain extent taught his son his native language, while Lina's father did not. For example, the most common response of Elliot's father when Elliot used a language other than Swiss German was to translate the child's utterance (or the lexical part of it). This occurred in 51/89 cases or 57% of the time. Translations provide the child with the word(s) in the adult's language – and may imply to the child that they should use these words. Another strategy Elliot's father used was pretending to guess what the child had said (this also involves translation, but in a question form; this response was counted separately to "translation"). An example of this strategy can be seen below. (Note that in the examples the following conventions are used: Swiss German is in small capitals, English is underlined and French is in italics.)

Example 1: Elliot (3;0) and father looking at a picture book

FATHER	WAS SIND DAS?
translation	what are these?
ELLIOT	AINS, presents.
translation	one, presents.
FATHER	GSCHÄNK WOTSCH? GSCHÄNK? DAS SIND GSCHÄNK. MAMI SAIT presents, UND PAPI SAIT GSCHÄNK. GSCHÄNK WOTSCH ZELE?
translation	is it presents that you want? presents? those are presents. mummy says presents, and daddy says presents. is it presents that you want to count?
ELLIOT	mhm.
FATHER	ALSO GUET. ALSO TÜEND MER GSCHÄNKLI ZELE.
translation	okay fine. so let's count little presents.
	(counting sequence omitted)
ELLIOT	NÜN.
translation	nine.
FATHER	BRAVO. SEER GUET, NÜN. JA, NÜN NÜN NÜN NÜN.
translation	bravo. very good, nine. yes, nine nine nine nine.
ELLIOT	ALLI GSCHÄNKLI.
translation	all little presents.
FATHER	ALLI GSCHÄNKLI, JA.
translation	all little presents, yes.

In this extract, it can be seen how Elliot's father immediately translates the word presents using a question form: GSCHÄNK WOTSCH? ("is it presents that you want?"). He then repeats GSCHÄNK another four times in different constructions. Note that in two of the constructions the object GSCHÄNK appears at the beginning of the sentence (GSCHÄNK WOTSCH? / GSCHÄNK WOTSCH ZELE?). This is a marked construction in Swiss German and draws attention to the object. In addition, he emphasises the one person, one language rule (MAMI SAIT presents "mummy says presents"). Thus the Swiss German term is emphasised via the immediate translation in question form, via repetition, via its grammatically marked position in two of the utterances, and via the metalinguistic comparison. Note also that the metalinguistic comparison may contain an affective element (PAPI SAIT GSCHÄNK "daddy says presents"); the intention may be to remind the child that he is now in conversation with this father and that he should therefore use his father's language.

With regard to Lina, the most common response of her father when she did not use French with him is simply to carry on with the conversation. This occurred in 193/433 cases or 45% of the time. With such a response, a child is given to understand that it is perfectly acceptable for them not to speak the adult's language. Lina's father's "mov[ing] on" with the conversation (Lanza 262) can be seen clearly in the following example. In this conversation, Lina is two years and four months old. She is trying to get her father to remember an incident in Berne but he has no idea of what she is talking about.

Example 2	Lina (2;4) and her father
LINA	ERINNERE?
translation	remember?
LINA	BÄÄN ERINNERE?
translation	remember Berne?
FATHER	*oui. il faut lui rappeler.*
translation	yes. we have to remind her.
comment	i.e. the mother
LINA	BÄÄN ERINNERE?
translation	remember Berne?
FATHER	ERINNERE?
translation	remember?
comment	imitates child in an exaggerated and slightly annoyed tone
LINA	JA, TU DÜÜTSCH REDE.
translation	yes, speak German.
comment	utterance has a smile quality
FATHER	*non, c'est Lina qui parle le- l'allemand. hm?*
translation	no, it's Lina who speaks German. hm?

Lina is not able to get her message across, neither here, nor later in the conversation when she talks about a ticket-vending machine and an exit sign at the station in Berne. Lina's father misunderstands her use of the Swiss German word ERINNERE, which Lina is using to mean "remember," and interprets it instead as "remind" (both these meanings exist for the word). She persists, but to no avail. Her father becomes annoyed and imitates her with a slightly sarcastic rendering of ERINNERE. Lina, however, does not perceive his annoyed tone of voice but rather his choice of language – which greatly pleases her. We hear a smile quality in her speech as she states "yes, speak German." Her father doesn't comply, and immediately switches back to French; however he states that it is his daughter who speaks German – thereby underlining the language choice already evident. This extract is typical of conversation between Lina and her father in the sense that one person fairly consistently speaks one language and the other fairly consistently speaks a different one – a type of conversation which De Houwer (*Bilingual First Language Acquisition* 361) has termed "dilingual." The extract is atypical, on the other hand, in that it involves a misunderstanding. De Houwer notes that for dilingual conversations to be possible, both must understand the other's language. Indeed, usually communication between Lina and her father functions smoothly. And in fact, smooth communication was precisely the reason Lina's father gave for not insisting that Lina speak French with him.

7.3. Language exposure patterns: Position of the community language

Besides interaction, more general aspects of language exposure were examined. One was the position of the community language in the language constellation for each child. It was pointed out in Section 4 that De Houwer (*Trilingual Input*) found that absence of the community language in the home was an important factor in whether or not children were actively trilingual. This is indeed the case for Elliot but not for Lina. In Elliot's case, the community language is French, but neither parent spoke French to him, nor to each other. However in Lina's case, the community language, Swiss German, was also the dominant home language, since this was the language Lina's mother spoke. Similarly, Braun and Cline found that multilingualism was particularly favoured when each parent had just one different native language, neither of which was the community language. Again, this is the case for Elliot, but not for Lina. Thus, according to these two studies, the language constellation in Elliot's family gave Elliot more favourable conditions from the start for becoming actively trilingual.

7.4. Language exposure patterns: Regularity and proportions of input

Another factor to be considered is the regularity of exposure to and the proportions of input for each language. In a trilingual family, it is very unlikely that a child will have equal input in all three languages over an extended period or even at any one given point in time. Lina had constant exposure to Swiss German via her mother from birth until the end of the case study. However, while her exposure to French and English was frequent, it was not constant. She did not always see her father every day, and was occasionally separated from him for longer periods due to his work overseas. Thus, when her father was away she had no exposure to French. In these periods she also had far less exposure to English, as she did not hear her parents talking to each other – although she still had some input from her American aunt. In terms of regularity, therefore, Lina had daily exposure to Swiss German, her maternal language, but not to her other two languages, while in terms of quantity, she also had more exposure to Swiss German because she was mostly cared for by her mother. She had considerably less and approximately equal amounts of exposure to her other two languages. These input details can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Regularity and proportion of input, Lina (birth – 3 years)

Language	Swiss German	French	English
Main source	Mother & community	Father	Aunt & parents' talk
Daily exposure	✓	×	×
Proportion	most	≈ least	≈ least

Concerning Elliot, he heard all three languages frequently and regularly but none of them every single day. This was because his mother travelled approximately once a month overseas on business, so there were regular periods in which Elliot did not hear English. His father lived in a different part of the country during the week, so exposure to the paternal language was not constant. Nor did Elliot hear French every day, since he attended day care, his main source of French, just three days a week. Thus, in terms of quantity Elliot heard his maternal language English most (recall that English was the couple language), and the day care

language, French, almost as much. The language heard least was Swiss German.

Table 6: Regularity and proportion of input, Elliot (7 months – 3 years)

Language	English	Swiss German	French
Main source	Mother & parents' talk	Father	Community
Daily exposure	×	×	×
Proportion	most	least	almost as much as English

We see that Lina had more exposure to her father's language than Elliot (recall that her father was at home for the first six months of the case study). But she did have a very unequal proportion of input overall, since one language, the maternal and community language, dominated both in terms of regularity and quantity. Elliot on the other hand, although he heard his father's language least, did not have a single other language which was so dominant in his life. He heard more English and French than Swiss German, but there were also days on which he heard neither. This lack of a single dominant language may have provided favourable conditions for the development of all three languages.

7.5. Input from others

One might, nevertheless, still be surprised that Elliot produced so much of his paternal language considering that his father was away from home five days a week. And here another factor must be considered, namely language input from other family members and friends, a factor which Braun and Cline (111, 121) mention as influential. In Elliot's case, his paternal grandmother looked after him once a month when his mother was away on business, and also had Elliot to stay with her on holidays, sometimes for a week at a time. In addition, there were family friends who spoke Swiss German – and the father insisted that they address Elliot in Swiss German, even though they were tempted to speak English. In Lina's case, though, her paternal grandmother lived in Belgium, and visited only about twice a year. Lina had no contact with other French-speaking relatives since all the other Belgian family members spoke Dutch. Further, it should be pointed out that Lina's grandmother

is not actually a native speaker of French (it was Lina's grandfather, now deceased, who was French-speaking). Thus, while Elliot had access to a variety of Swiss-German speakers, Lina had little French input from others. Elliot saw that other people spoke the language of his father, and these were close family members and friends that he saw quite often. For Lina, though, this widened dimension of language use was lacking.

8. Summary and conclusion

This paper has examined the language development of two children exposed to three languages from infancy. It focused on the production of their paternal languages, which are minority languages for both children. We saw that although both fathers follow the one person, one language principle, and speak their native languages to their children most of the time, only one child, Elliot, produces much of the paternal language. Explanations for this difference were sought within the framework of social interactionism, which posits that adult-child interactions are important for language acquisition; reasons were further sought in more general aspects of the family setting and family practices. With regard to caregiver consistency, it could be seen that both fathers used the native languages consistently, although Elliot's father was highly consistent (97% of his turns were uniquely in his native language), while Lina's father was less so (89%). An example of his accommodation to Lina's choice of language could be seen in Example 2. The conversational style of the fathers was seen as salient. When the children did not use their paternal languages with their fathers, Elliot's father made a point of providing his son with the appropriate vocabulary, and emphasising the translated terms, while Lina's father preferred to simply continue the conversation, despite the fact that this meant that each of them was speaking a different language. With regard to more general language exposure patterns, we saw that in Elliot's case, the community language was kept out of the home, while in Lina's case, the community language was also the main home language. This led to one single language having a very dominant presence for Lina, but not for Elliot. Finally, input in the paternal language from other family members or friends gave Elliot further input in and emotional connections to his paternal language. Elliot was able to experience a Swiss German-speaking world, while Lina lacked such a dimension for French. These factors are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7: Input factors and paternal language output

Input	Elliot	Lina
One person, one language maintained	✓	✓
Didactic conversational style of father	✓	×
Community language absent from home	✓	×
No single dominant input language	✓	×
Regular input in paternal language from others	✓	×
Output		
Usually uses paternal language with father	✓	×

To conclude, we can say that maintaining a paternal language in multilingual families can be a particular challenge. Note that this applies equally to the maternal language as soon as the mother works outside the home as much as the father. In this paper, we have seen that despite a small quantity of input, Elliot's father was able to create an environment in which his son chose to speak his father's language. Lina's father, on the hand, was not. The role of interactional style in creating this environment was seen as salient, while further external factors, such as the absence of the community language in the home and input from others lent further support.

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