Examining English-Only Practices in a Bilingual Family

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Background

Bilingual and multilingual parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and other complex communication disorders are often advised to speak only one language to their children. English is usually the language that is targeted.

(Kremer-Sadlik, 2005; Wharton, Levine, Miller, Breslau, & Greenspan, 2000; B. Yu, 2009)
Common Assumptions Motivating the English-Only Practice

1. The Child would be confused by more than one language.

2. Bilingualism would slow down or hinder the child’s language development and learning.

3. The child would learn language faster if he just focused on one.
Common Assumptions Motivating the English-Only Practice

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For research & discussions on these topics, please see the reference list provided.
How is it done in daily life?
The Current Study

We examined the language use and interactional patterns of one bilingual Chinese- and English-speaking family in which family members were committed to using only English with a 7-year-old child with autism.
The Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to investigate whether and how the family members were able to achieve an English-only practice with the child even though Chinese continued to be a frequently used and preferred language among many of the family members.
Participants and Study Context

- The family: Oscar, mother, father, 9-year-old sister, grandfather, adult cousin
- English-only language practice with child established 3 years
Family Members’ Rationale

Father: So he won’t get confused.

Mother: To make it easier on his teachers.

Grandfather: He doesn’t understand Chinese.

Cousin: He knows more English.

Sister: Mom & Dad told me to.
The Larger Project

- January to September 2007 in family’s home
- Participant observation (1-2 hours, 1-3x/week), video-recordings, ethnographic interviews, field notes
- Emphasis on multiparty events (i.e., dinner)
Focal Data

- The findings reported here are based on the analysis of 4 detailed transcripts and videos. Two are from January of that year and two are from February.

- All four videos depicted routine events
## Transcription

**Tape: 2/15/2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Family States of Talk</th>
<th>Direct Speech to O</th>
<th>Respond from O as a bystander</th>
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<td>00:02~4:43</td>
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Looking at the **utterance** level

![Bar chart showing utterances directed to Oscar on different dates.](chart.png)
Limitations of Utterance Level Analysis

- Isolated moments of speaking
- No sense of purpose & shared meaning built via progression of utterances & actions
- Relational dynamics limited to direct speakers and listeners
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- Isolated moments of speaking
- No sense of purpose & shared meaning built via progression of utterances & actions
- Relational dynamics limited to direct speakers and listeners
- Need contextualized utterances
- Need to observe the progressive unfolding of joint meaning over time
- Need to observe relational dynamics of multiparty interactions
Alternative: Participation Framework

Participation configurations

- **Dominating**: primary engagement of ratified participants
- **By play**: subordinate exchange of ratified participants
- **Cross play**: ratified participant & bystander
- **Side play**: among bystanders

(Erving Goffman, 1983)
State of Talk

“Social encounter in which participants are obliged to sustain involvement in what is being said and ensure that no long stretch occurs when no one (and not more than one) is taking the floor. No talk may be happening, but the participants are still in a state of talk. An encounter has structural features: initiations and terminations.” (Goffman 1983, p. 134).
States of Talk in Our Study

• For the purpose of this study, and interaction was considered a state of talk if it was marked by an initiation and termination of sustained interaction towards a purpose to which participants are mutually oriented.

• Considered over when the participants lapse into a silence of 5 minutes or longer with no obvious intention for return to the interaction.
Alternative: Participation Framework

Participation configurations

- Dominating: primary engagement of ratified participants
- By play: subordinate exchange of ratified participants
- Cross play: ratified participant & bystander
- Side play: among bystanders

(Erving Goffman, 1983)
Shifting Our Analytic Focus

Isolated, dyadic instances of speaking & listening
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Isolated, dyadic instances of speaking & listening

Moments of shared engagement for the family
Looking at the talk level

When we moved our focus of analysis to the states of talk, we found that Chinese played a prominent role in all states of talk involving the child.
37. Mom  ((Laughing)) You want that one? ((Points to papaya)) You want try? ((Pointing)) That is a papaya.

38. Lulu  Papaya. Papaya!

39. Mom  *Ni ge ta yi ge shi shi kan*  Give him one to try

40. Mom  ((Pointing to fork in Oscar’s hand)) Use fork. Use little fork to try.

41. Dad  ((Comes closer to Oscar with papaya))

42. Mom  This fork. Use fork. This fork- ((Moves Oscar’s hand)) use that. ((Oscar moves fork towards papaya)) Pick up one. Yeah. And eat.

43.  ((Oscar eats a piece of papaya from his fork))

44. Mom  ((Laughing)) That’s a papaya!

45. Dad  *Ta di yi zi chi ah?*  He’s eating it for the first time?

46. Mom  *Ying gai shi*  Should be

47.  ((The papaya piece falls from Oscar’s fork on to the floor))
Conclusion

The findings support the need for contextualized, discourse-level analysis of multiparty family talk.

In the case of bilingual and multilingual families, the findings also suggest the need for therapists to better support home language practices that fit the dynamics of the family.
References


