Private language planning: The best of both worlds?

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Abstract

One aspect of childhood bilingualism that is frequently overlooked is the fact that, in many cases, childhood bilingualism is the result of private language planning. Particularly so-called "elite bilinguals" (middle-class international couples, expatriates, academics who raise their children in a non-native language, etc.) make carefully considered choices when it comes to the question whether to educate their children bilingually, and how to go about it. This article reviews the research literature on childhood bilingualism as it pertains to parental language planning. The main part of the article is devoted to an exploration of the choices parents make in such contexts, the ideologies that inform those choices and the practices that they engage in (as evidenced in self-reports). Finally, the attention will turn to the reported outcomes and the evaluations of those outcomes. The findings suggest that only a very limited number of aspects of public discourses (the research literature) filter through into private discourses (parental reports on their language planning). Consequently, the parents act in a societal context where bilingualism is increasingly valorised, but where a limited understanding of the sociolinguistics of bilingualism often leads to disappointment and self-doubt.

Key words: language planning, childhood bilingualism, language ideologies, bilingual acquisition, elite bilingualism, discourse analysis.

Resumo

Un aspecto do bilingüismo infantil, que con frecuencia se pasa por alto, é o feito de que, en moitos casos, é o resultado dunha planificación lingüística privada. Máis en concreto, os chamados "bilingües de elite" (parellas de clase media e con diferentes nacionalidades, emigrantes, intelectuais e membros do mundo universitario que educan os seus fillos nunha lingua foránea, etc.) meditan moito as súas decisións cando se refire a cómo educar os seus fillos de xeito bilingüe, e cómo levalo a cabo. Este artigo revisa as investigacións en bilingüismo infantil que tratan a planificación lingüística familiar. O núcleo do artigo trata de investigar as decisións que os pais toman nestes contextos, as ideoloxías que están detrás das decisións e as prácticas das que participan, tal como así o revelan os pais mesmos. Por último,

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o texto céntrase nos resultados conseguidos e na avaliación destes resultados. Tales resultados suxiren que só unha moi pequena parte dos temas tratados nos discursos públicos (nas investigacións sobre o tema) penetran nos discursos privados (informes dos pais sobre a súa propia planificación lingüística). En consecuencia, os pais actúan nun contexto social no que cada vez se valora máis o bilingüismo, pero a falta de entendemento da sociolingüística do bilingüismo con moita frecuencia desilusiónaos e éncheos de dúbidas.

Palabras clave: planificación lingüística, bilingüismo infantil, ideoloxías lingüísticas, adquisición bilingüe, bilingüismo de elite, análise do discurso.

1. Introduction

Language planning is usually seen as a public endeavour which is most typically carried out by states planning the status and/or corpus of their national language(s). However, it is not only states who engage in language planning but also individuals. Grosjean (1982: 169, 173) speaks of childhood bilingualism as "a planned affair" and of "planned bilingualism in the family" in reference to parents who make a conscious decision to raise their children bilingually. In this article I am going to examine these language planning practices of individuals, specifically parents who plan the linguistic future of their children. Bilingual parents have a choice whether to educate their children only in one of their languages, usually the majority language of the country in which they live, or whether to educate them bilingually. This article aims to investigate those choices: the decisions that are being made and the actual practices that ensue. I am particularly interested in the ways in which public discourses about bilingualism impact upon these private decisions and practices. Therefore I will first review the research literature on language planning in the family, and then go on to examine how this research has been received into popular discourses of childhood bilingualism. The focus of this section will be on the self-reports of bilingual families, who are usually considered as "elite bilinguals", i.e. middle-class international couples, expatriates, and academics who raise their children in a non-native language. The self-reports come from published (newsletters, internet sites and mailing lists) and unpublished (sociolinguistic interviews) sources. The central concern of that section will be how public discourses (the research literature) are received into popular discourses and shape the planning decisions, practices and evaluations of bilingual parents.

2. Childhood bilingualism as a planned affair: The research literature

Research into the language development of the children of bilingual couples has a considerable tradition. It started in 1913, when Ronjat published his observations about his son's first five years of simultaneous acquisition of French (from his father) and German (from his mother). Leopold's (1939-1949) four-volume *Speech*

Development of a Bilingual Child is a further landmark in that tradition. It describes vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar development in his daughter, to whom he spoke in German while his wife spoke English to her. It is not my aim here to review this vast body of research. Instead I will focus on the parental planning strategies mentioned or described in this research. Parental planning *per se* is hardly ever the focus of books and articles on childhood bilingualism, but tends to be a side-issue, a backdrop against which the child's bilingual acquisition occurs. The results of the practical and applicable aspects of this academic work have been summarised and made accessible to the general reading public in two influential volumes, which are widely read by bilingual parents and parents-to-be, namely Harding & Riley (1986) and Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson (1999). These books have served to popularise the typology of communication in bilingual families that the research into the language development of bilingual children has resulted in (e.g. Romaine, 1995: 181-240). This typology distinguishes six different communication strategies that lead to bilingual development.

Type 1: One Person – One Language

If this strategy is chosen, each parent speaks their native language to the child, and the community language is one of these languages.

Type 2: One Language – One Environment

If this strategy is used, both parents speak to the child in the language that is not dominant in the community. This strategy is based on the assumption that the child will acquire the community language anyway, for instance in preschool. Type 1 and 2 are best documented in the research literature.

Type 3: Non-Dominant Home Language Without Community Support

In this case, the parents have the same language which is not the community language, however. A famous early study of this pattern is Pavlovitch (1920), who presents one of the first longitudinal case studies of bilingual acquisition, of a child of Serbian-speaking parents in France.

Type 4: Double Non-Dominant Home Language Without Community Support

In this situation, each parent has a different native language, neither of which is the community language, and each parent speaks their own variety to the child. In this situation, trilingual, rather than bilingual, acquisition occurs. One of the most extensive documentations of this type can be found in Hoffmann (1985), who reports on the acquisition of English (from the community), German (from the mother), and Spanish (from the father).

Type 5: Non-Native Parents

Here, parents have the same native language, which is also the language of wider communication in the community. However, one parent or both parents always talks to the child in a non-native language. Such situations have been documented

e.g. by Saunders (1982, 1988) and Döpke (1992). George Saunders, a native speaker of Australian English, was successful in teaching his three children German, in addition to English, in Australia. Döpke studied a similar situation: the English- and German-speaking families she observed in Australia included some for which German was not a native language of either parent.

Type 6: Mixed Languages

In this situation, the parents are bilingual and one or both parents switch and mix languages with the child. The community may also be bilingual, as is for instance the case in one of the earliest studies of this type of bilingual acquisition, namely Tabouret-Keller (1962), who studied the simultaneous acquisition of French and German by a child who was born to bilingual parents in the Alsace, a bilingual region of France, bordering Germany.

Table 1 presents an overview of these six types of bilingual education in the family, specifying the parental languages, community languages, and parental linguistic strategies (drawing on Romaine, 1995: 183-85).

Table 1. *Types of bilingual education in the family*

	Parental languages	Community languages(s)	Strategy
Type 1	Different L1s	The L1 of one parent	Each parent speaks their language to the child.
Type2	Different L1s	The L1 of one parent	Both parents speak the non-dominant language to the child, who is exposed to the dominant language outside the home, particularly in daycare and preschool.
Type 3	Same L1	The L1 of neither parent	Both parents speak the non-dominant language to the child, who is exposed to the dominant language outside the home, particularly in daycare and preschool.
Type 4	Different L1s	The L1 of neither parent	Each parent speaks their language to the child, who is exposed to the dominant language outside the home, particularly in daycare and preschool.
Type 5	Same L1	L1 of both parents	One parent speaks an L2 to the child.
Type 6	Bilingual (either L1s or L2s)	May or may not be bilingual	The parents code-switch and mix languages with the child.

The usefulness of the distinction between native and non-native speakers has become increasingly problematic in recent research (e.g., Coulmas, 1997; Kramsch, 1997).

If that distinction between native and non-native speaking parents is disregarded as irrelevant, the above typology of bilingualism in the family can be reduced to the following classification of strategies parents might use in planning their children's linguistic future.

Strategy 1: One person, one language (Type 1, Type 4, Type 5)
Strategy 2: Home language vs. community language (Type 2, Type 3, Type 4)
Strategy 3: Code-switching and language mixing (Type 6)

Grosjean (1982) adds a fourth strategy:
Strategy 4: Consecutive introduction of the two languages

In the following I will briefly comment on the research conducted into the use of each strategy. I am not concerned with bilingual acquisition in itself but rather the ways in which the strategy is being reported and assessed. It is important to note that most of the research literature on childhood bilingualism is mainly concerned with the processes and patterns involved in bilingual acquisition rather than the parents'role and perspective. In particular, there is comparatively little consideration of their language planning activities.

Strategy 1: One person, one language

The "une personne, une langue" strategy was first suggested by Ronjat (1913), who agreed with his wife that she would only speak German to their son, while he would only speak French to him. Ronjat's assessment of the success of the strategy is upbeat: at age 15 his son Louis was a balanced bilingual who was equally fluent in French and German. Other researchers have reported unequivocal success less frequently: Leopold (1939-1949), for instance, found that his daughter Hildegard's German was clearly her weaker language by the time she was fifteen years old. The strategy was even less successful with his younger daughter who refused to speak German from a very early age onwards and who became a passive bilingual, i.e. she understood German but did not use it herself. Döpke's (1992) comparative study of the bilingual (English and German) acquisition of six children from different families also demonstrates clearly that the "one person – one language" principle does not work equally well for different families: she found that those children whose parents were the most consistent in their language choice and who were the most insistent that the children respect the "one person – one language" principle achieved the highest levels of competence in both languages. As will be shown below, the "one person – one language" has become axiomatic in recommendations for bilingual parents and bilingual parents themselves regard it as "the best" strategy. However, recently some more sociolinguistic oriented researchers such as Gupta (2000: 116-17) have questioned the usefulness of this strategy on the basis of evidence from "the cosmopolis", i.e. multilingual and multicultural cities such as Singapore, Sydney or

New York. The effects of rapid globalisation on childhood bilingualism remain as yet largely unexplored.

Strategy 2: Home language vs. community language

This strategy results in a pattern which is found in many diglossic situations: a different language is used in the home, in the community, and in the neighbourhood from the language that is used in the school, at work, and by the media. As Grosjean (1982: 174) points out, the only difference between this frequently found pattern and the strategy typically described in the research on bilingual acquisition is that in the latter case "the family has decided to enforce the home-outside the home dichotomy, whereas in general it is not enforced." The strategy was first described by Pavlovitch (1920): the son of Serbian-speaking parents living in France only heard Serbian until he was 13 months old, when a French-speaking family friend began to spend time with him. The researcher is positive in his assessment of the strategy when he writes that his son started to speak both languages simultaneously and that he never mixed or confused the languages. However –as is often the case in research on bilingual acquisition– the study ends at a relatively early age, just before Pavlovitch's son turns two. Therefore, a "positive" assessment of the success of a strategy by a researcher may be quite different from the assessment of parents. While researchers tend to refer to various measures of age-appropriate linguistic competence at any given point in time, parents tend to expect their children to become bilingual adolescents and adults.

A more longitudinal study in which the "home language vs. community language" strategy was used is Fantini's (1982, 1985) analysis of the bilingual acquisition of English and Spanish by his two children. The family spoke Spanish at home while living in the United States, and both children were fully bilingual and bicultural by the time the older one was ten. Furthermore, their metalinguistic awareness was significantly advanced over that of their monolingual peers and they showed a strong interest in languages and cultures generally.

Strategy 3: Code-switching and language mixing

There is significantly less research into this type of bilingual acquisition because, as Romaine (1995: 186) points out, "a great many of the studies have been done by parents educated as linguists, i.e. middle-class professionals, investigating their own children's development." A pattern of code-switching and language-mixing may or may not involve a conscious decision to use this strategy. If it does, parents adopt a laissez-faire style of language planning or decide "to play it by ear" (Harding & Riley, 1986: 85).

Tabouret-Keller (1962; see above) found that the mixed input of the parents lead to considerable mixing of the two languages also in the child. Furthermore, this researcher found that it took the child much longer to realise that she was acquiring two languages rather than one than the children reported upon by studies in which other strategies were used. Most of the warnings against mixing languages with

children in the popular literature (see below) seem to derive from this early study –if they derive from research at all. Because this research is much more frequently concerned with lower-status speakers and/or lower-status languages –rather than the "elite bilinguals" who are the focus of research where strategies 1 and 2 are used– it may simply be ignored in the popular literature. Harding & Riley (1986), for instance, which is probably the most important volume that makes bilingualism research accessible to a non-academic readership, simply ignores this strategy.

However, as a recent study of bilingual acquisition shows, not mixing may not be an option in many bilingual situations. The work of Ana Celia Zentella (1997) with a number of Spanish- and English-speaking children in New York's Puerto Rican community is unique in that it spans almost twenty years and three generations, a time commitment very rarely achieved even in the best of longitudinal studies. Unlike most studies in bilingual language acquisition, this research is not concerned with the children of middle-class parents but rather with the language practices of an immigrant community. Tabouret-Keller's (1962) work in the Alsace was also with a working class couple, incidentally. It may be that the language-mixing strategy is so despised because it is a linguistic practice that is strongly associated with lower-status speakers. All the girls in Zentella's study are successful in that they learn to juggle a number of varieties and that they become truly multilingual in Puerto Rican Spanish, Puerto Rican English, African-American Vernacular English, New York Spanglish etc. However, the standard varieties of English and Spanish are not accessible to most of them, and therefore their bilingual acquisition tends to be seen as a failure. Zentella shows that it is not code-switching and language mixing *per se*, but social and educational injustice in combination with crippling notions like "Spanglish" or "double semi-lingualism" which effectively bar three generations of Puerto Rican immigrants from full participation in the American dream. The concept of "semi-lingualism" is suggested to be a result of the failure of educators to grasp the complex relationships between standard languages and their non-standard varieties.

Strategy 4: Consecutive introduction of the two languages

This strategy, in which parents decide to delay exposure to the community language for a least two years, was first reported by Zierer (1977). The researcher describes how a German-Peruvian couple decided to delay exposure to Spanish in Peru until German was considered to be firmly established. This strategy included finding only German-speaking playmates for the child and to ask the Spanish-speaking grandmother not to speak to the child until the time had come to expose him to Spanish. Once he was exposed to Spanish he learnt is within four months. Kouritzin (2000) similarly describes how she and her husband decided to expose their children only to Japanese in Canada, and to delay exposure to English until the children would have to start school. At the time of publication, the author's children

had not yet been exposed to English, so there is no information on the outcome of this practice available. However, the article is unusual in its detailed attention to the parental decision-making process. Based on their reading of studies in language maintenance and loss, the experiences of other minority parents who found it hard to maintain the heritage language once the children were exposed to the community language, and their commitment to Japanese language and culture, Sandra Kouritzin and her husband decided to "adopt 'hothouse' conditions for early bilingualism in order to maximize the Japanese language input […]. We plan to speak Japanese exclusively until our children begin school" (Kouritzin, 2000: 312). At that time, they plan to begin implementing a "one person – one language approach".

In the research literature, the strategy of consecutive bilingualism is the least documented one, and, like the mixing strategy, is portrayed negatively in or is absent from the popular literature (see below). One reason for that might be that consecutive acquisition is not seen as "real" bilingual acquisition. Although there is evidence that consecutive childhood bilinguals achieve as high proficiency levels as simultaneous bilinguals (see Hamers & Blanc, 2000: 65-72 for a review), evidence also abounds for a critical period in language learning (e.g. Long, 1990). However, while research on the critical period assumes it to occur around puberty, this work translates as "the earlier, the better" in its reception by the wider public.

In sum, the research on childhood bilingualism has identified four different strategies that parents can use if they plan to raise their children bilingually. However, only two of these strategies are commonly associated with elite bilingualism ("one person – one language" and "home language vs. community language") and consequently the two other ones ("language-mixing and code-switching" and "consecutive bilingualism") tend to be much more negatively evaluated. As a result of their association with work-class and immigrant groups, the usefulness of the strategies themselves is thrown into question. While much of the research on childhood bilingualism has been conducted in a psycholinguistic framework, sociolinguists emphasise that the evaluation of the different planning strategies is not about language but about social inequality. The practices of the well-to-do are a source of linguistic security and a sought after advantage, but the bilingualism of the poor is a source of insecurity and disadvantage.

3. Childhood bilingualism as a planned affair: Parents' views

Bilingualism is often portrayed as a problem in societies in which the majority is monolingual and which hold strong monolingual ideologies. However, not every form of bilingualism is "created equal". As Cashman (1999) points out, ideologies of "differential bilingualism" lead to negative evaluations of minority bilingualism, but positive evaluations of majority bilingualism. That is, the bilingualism of minorities

(e.g. Hispanics in the US) is evaluated negatively, while the bilingualism of the dominant group (e.g. Anglo-Americans who learn Spanish as a second language) is evaluated positively. This valorisation of certain types of bilingualism –the bilingualism of "the right people" speaking "the right languages" or varieties– has recently started to receive increasing attention (e.g. Heller, 2000; Piller, 2001a). Even so, even "elite bilinguals" who consider raising their children bilingually may still face opposition from extended family, members of the medical profession, teachers, or well-meaning strangers. Consequently, there is a need for mutual support and self-help; a need which is catered for by an increasing number of newsletters and internet sites. The best-known such publication with an international circulation is *The Bilingual Family Newsletter*, but there are many regional ones, too, such as *Polyglott* in Germany. Furthermore, expatriate newsletters such as *Currents: Information for the English-speaking community in Hamburg, The Written Word: The Newsletter for English-speaking people in Baden-Württemberg,* or *In Touch: English speakers in the Regio* carry articles about childhood bilingualism on a regular basis. There are also many different websites and other internet resources such as mailing lists which are specifically devoted to and run by bilingual families. Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson (1999) provides an appendix with a list of internet resources. One of the most-frequented of these is http://www.nethelp.no/cindy/biling-fam.html, which also hosts "the Bilingual Families mailing list", biling-fam. Often, the authors of these documents, who are mainly parents involved in bilingual education, try to provide encouragement in a world perceived as hostile. In particular, they encourage bilingual couples to raise their children as simultaneous bilinguals. The importance of such resources for parents in bilingual situations against the backdrop of monolingual ideologies cannot be overestimated. The following posting on biling-fam is typical:

> I am a new member and want to say hello. I wish I have had an access to such a list these last 7 years! We are a Russian family living in the U.S. Our son is now 7 years old. We have spoken Russian almost exclusively at home. Our son is practically bilingual, having lived in an English-speaking country since he was 2. We now have a 3-month-old daughter. I feel SO much more relaxed and confident about raising her up bilingual! I used to worry about him learning English more or less on his own; making friends with English-speaking children; feeling confident at school. Then I worried about his Russian –should I end up speaking corrupted English with my son? Would he be able to learn his Cyrillic alphabet? Would he start reading in Russian? I wouldn't have worried so much have I had more advice. It is great to be able to read about other people's experiences! Also, can anyone recommend anything to read on bilingualism? (biling-fam posting, on May 30, 1997)

I have monitored these newsletters and participated in these online communities to varying degrees for the past 4.5 years (January 1997 – May 2001). Thus, the data for this article come from these sources. In addition, there is a second source of data, namely conversational data for a sociolinguistic study of the linguistic practices of bilingual couples which I collected between 1997 and 1999 (see Piller, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001b, for further perspectives on those data). One partner in these relationships had English as their first language, and the other one German. As part of my research I had asked volunteer couples to self-record one of their conversations and let me have the tape. As most couples were reluctant to record an everyday conversation I suggested a list of possible topics for them to address in their conversations. The topics I suggested included how they had come to choose a language as a couple, if and how each partner had learnt the other partner's language, what they liked and disliked about each other's countries and cultures, and whether they were bringing up their children bilingually. The sample of consultants was being drawn on a voluntary, self-select basis from bilingual couples who could be reached through advertisements in bilingual interest publications, radio shows, or internet sites. Those couples who responded to the ad were sent a subject information statement together with the discussion paper and an audiotape. In this way, I collected conversations from 51 couples, 38 of whom lived in a German-speaking country (Germany, Austria), 10 in an English-speaking country (Britain, USA), and three in a third country (Belgium, Israel, the Netherlands).

The research presented in this article thus draws (a) on a corpus of naturally-occurring, published, written data and (b) on a corpus of elicited, private, spoken data. The spoken data are augmented by one focus-group interview with four English-speaking mothers conducted in Hamburg, Germany. References to language planning were identified in both corpora and in the following I will discuss recurring issues in those references. In this content-analytic study the reception of childhood bilingualism research into popularised discourses was of particular interest. The most central finding is that all the parents who contribute on public forums such a newsletter or on the internet sites as well as those who participated in the conversations wanted to raise their children bilingually, i.e. all of them had made a choice to educate their children in both languages or planned to do so if they did not yet have children or said they would have done so if they had had children. Of course, this is not surprising given that many of the public forums are expressly dedicated to supporting bilingual parenting and that the consultants for the conversations were mainly recruited through such forums as well. The same commitment to bilingual education was found by Tuominen (1999) when she interviewed immigrant families in the US on their language maintenance practices. However, the possibility remains that parents with a commitment to bilingual education are simply more likely to be accessible to linguistic research and to participate in linguistic research than parents

who do not share such a commitment. At the same time, bilingualism may indeed be so highly valued by people who are bilingual themselves that they want to pass it on to their children. I will now discuss the ways in which the bilingual parents in my sample spoke about their language planning in the family. I will focus on the following issues: (1) childhood bilingualism as investment; (2) the importance of the consistent application of a strategy; (3) the importance of starting young; and (4) balanced bilingualism as the expected outcome and measure of success.

3.1. Childhood bilingualism as investment

A mother who is the only Japanese-speaker in her nuclear family and who has therefore given up her career in order to be able to educate her children in Japanese in the US writes:

> I cannot imagine ever regretting the effort put into raising the kids with two languages. Currently, they are both bilingual and I consider this to be a terrific asset. (http://www.byu.edu/~bilingua/Prosserbackground.html; last visited on May 09, 2001)

This statement is typical in that most of the parents who reflect upon their motivations and reasons for educating their children bilingually seem to do so as an investment in their children's future. Financial metaphors such as "asset" above abound. Sometimes the financial metaphor is further explicated in that childhood bilingualism is seen as a small investment (because language acquisition in childhood is easy) which is expected to yield a high return (because the child is expected to acquire native proficiency). In contrast, second language learning later in life, particularly foreign language learning in school, is seen as much more of an effort, and thus a higher investment, which yields lower returns (because only limited proficiency can be expected or because late learners are not expected to achieve native-like proficiency). The following statement by a native speaker of German who brings up his children bilingually in English and German in Germany exemplifies this extended metaphor:

> I thought that it must be a great thing to acquire English nearly unconsciously. My friends encouraged me to try it, they thought that my English would be sufficient to do it. Another thing which influenced my decision was the fact that English is the dominant language in our world. I knew and I had realized very often how important it is to be able to speak it. I was also aware of how much is involved in learning a foreign language at school or even later and how comparatively easy it is to acquire it as a pre-school child. Another important aspect is that if you are bilingual you are more of a world citizen and not a nationalist.
> (http://www.byu.edu/~bilingua/Kleinbackground.html; last visited on May 09, 2001)

It emerges that what matters most to these parents is "native-like" proficiency –that is the return they expect for their investment. Their expectation of the bilingual competence of their children confirm Heller's (2000: 10) analysis: "what is valued is the careful separation of linguistic practices, being monolingual several times over." Or, as Anita[1], who raises her daughter bilingually in English and German in Germany expresses it:

> you know hopefully Katja will get the best of both worlds. from it.[2]

The investment does not always pay off: in a first-person case study Fries (1998) describes her effort to raise her children bilingually in English and French in France over a 25-year period. At age 20, "although [her] daughter says she feels more at ease in French, her English is very good. She understands American and English movies and speaks with near-native phonemes and intonation" (1998: 135). This might be considered an achievement by any standards, but the author had invested so heavily in her daughter's bilingualism that she experiences "feelings of disappointment" (Fries, 1998: 136) at the fact that her daughter is dominant in French.

> As time passed I felt a deep sense of grief. I realized that throughout the years I had always considered my daughter's bilingualism as the most precious gift that I was giving her, and that an exceptional grade in English on the *baccalauréat* would be the official sanction of that endeavor. As it turned out, there was no recognition, no applause. [The daughter had scored 13/20 on her English test]. (…) Ultimately, English became one more thing that was less important to my children than to me.
> (Fries, 1998: 136-137, 140)

The danger of disappointment seems to be inherent in the widespread acceptance of the metaphor "bilingual education is an investment", particularly if the yardstick by which achievement is measured is very high, as the aim of "balanced bilingualism" (see below) implies.

3.2. The importance of the consistent application of a strategy

A central tenet of the childhood bilingualism creed is the importance of choosing a strategy and of sticking to one's guns once the decision has been made.

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[1]All the names of persons who participated in the private conversations are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

[2] See transcription conventions at the end of the text.

The importance of strategy choice and consistency comes up again and again in my data. The following quote is typical:

> Whatever pattern you choose, stick to it. Although children can learn two languages in what seems like chaos, a reasonable amount of consistency will make their job, and yours, simpler. Once children learn the pattern they are often disturbed when a parent breaks it.
>
> (http://www.nethelp.no/cindy/practical.html; last visited on May 09, 2001)

The strategy a bilingual couple chooses in educating their children bilingually, plays such a central role in their identification that it often becomes part of the signature in letters to the editor or postings to biling-fam. People who follow the "one person – one language" strategy use the abbreviation "OPOL" in their signature lines, while people who employ the second strategy identified above ("Home language vs. community language") sign off with "mL@H", "MLaH" or "ML@H", which stands for "minority language at home".

"Always/never" and "consistency" or synonyms of these are the two most frequently used attributes that occur in the conversations when the bilinguals couples speak about their linguistic parenting practices. Joanne, for instance, who follows the "one person – one language" strategy and speaks English with her son in Germany says:

> dennoch erm bin ich hier sehr konsequent, und spreche weiterhin Englisch mit- mit Lyndon, denn ist es ei- halt seine Muttersprache. und darauf poche ich. ('nevertheless I am very consistent in this, and continue to speak English with- with Lyndon, because it is his mother tongue after all. and I insist on that.').

Likewise, Doris, who also uses the "one person – one language" strategy to teach her children German in Britain says:

> and Diana of course speaks German to me all the time. @or I speak German to HER all the time.@ and she answers BACK.

The underlined phrase highlights the importance that the speaker attributes to consistency. The central importance of "consistency" is also echoed by Cathy, one of the mothers in the focus-group interview:

> but as to say it- it- it's- the main thing is once you've chosen, once, you gotta- you gotta stick to it and we said that a lot of times.

Given that consistency in the application of one's chosen strategy is considered of such fundamental importance throughout my data, it comes as no surprise that no one is using (or admits to using?) the third strategy identified above ("language-mixing and code-switching"), in which a certain degree of inconsistency is almost inherent. There are only few people who take exception with the idea that language-mixing and code-switching are undesirable in bilingual education. Jane, another participant in the focus-group interview, is one of them:

> but there's a lot of prejudices against bilingualism. language differences are bad for the children and switching languages is very bad, and I mean we sit down together with our spouses, languages are switched back and forth like crazy and there is nothing wrong with that so it's- it's- it's I think it's really- it's a prejudice that you're NOT supposed to switch languages simply because other people can't do it, maybe, I don't know, but erm I hear a lot that this is- this is very bad you shouldn't switch languages as in that- as- for children- yes it's not good for the children, they should learn t- one language to separate, but as an ADULT it's normal that you- that you switch languages.

By far the most frequently chosen strategy is "one person – one language", with "home language vs. community language" coming second. The reasons for choosing one over the other very often seem to be related to the partner's proficiency in each other's language. If only one partner speaks the minority language (well), "one person – one language" may often be the only option, as the following writer explains:

> My husband and I use the 'one parent – one language' method and we speak English together, but I always revert back to French to address the children. My husband's French is very hesitant and his understanding is limited.   (Price, 1999)

One partner's limited proficiency may actually be one of the major obstacles that parents encounter as they try to carry through their plans to use "one person – one language". During their conversation, Anita, for instance, asks her partner Werner how much he understands when she speaks English to their 2-year-old daughter:

> Anita: yeah. … well *also*,[3] when I speak English to Katja, do you always understand what I'm saying?
> Werner: usually most of it, yes.

---

[3] German "also", English 'ok'.

If one parent has difficulties participating in, or even following, the interactions between the other parent and the child/children, this may lead to a sense of exclusion. Price (1999) continues: "I know there are many occasions when he feels excluded from the conversation, although I often translate for him, or the children switch to English to speak to him."

3.3. The importance of starting young

As in the examples quoted above (see 3.1.), a further motivation to opt for childhood bilingualism is that children are assumed to acquire their languages "unconsciously" or "naturally" while second or foreign language learning at a later date involves much more conscious effort and application. This belief is related to the Critical Period Hypothesis. However, while researchers tend to assume that the critical period –if it is assumed to exist all (cf. recent debate such as Birdsong, 1999; Marinova-Todd, Bradford Marshall & Snow, 2000)– is around puberty, in the popular literature it is often thought to occur in the first year of life, as in the following example:

> Children learn all the sounds that make up the native languages they are going to speak by the time they've turned one. This is why we can't speak the languages we learn later in life with flawless accents; we don't have the right wires laid down in our brains and connected early enough. (Fox, 2001: 45)

Consequently, parents tend to stress the importance of starting early, as Christine does in the following excerpt:

> I've always spoken German to both of them, <u>from day one</u>. and erm that was the language they first spoke, when- as infants. and then of course it came to them having to go to play-school, and school, and it was usually an army one. and they had to learn English there. and the headmasters of two schools both said it was a very bad idea to bring them up bilingual, and I ought to STOP speaking German to them. I should speak ENGLISH to them. to make it easier for them. and I said I would, but I didn't. so, erm they have no problems with their English. Angela's German is quite good. Barbara is too lazy. she understands everything I say, cos I only speak German to her, but everything she sort of speaks back to me is always in English.

Despite the fact that the evidence of her daughters' language usage in their early teens does not indicate that their early start in German resulted in native-like ability in that language, the belief in starting young remains unchallenged.

3.4. Balanced bilingualism as the expected outcome

It is a common assumption throughout my corpus that, if the parents do the right thing, their children will be highly proficient, balanced bilinguals. Bilingualism researchers are in unison that very few balanced bilinguals, if any, exist because the contexts in which people acquire and use their languages will always be different. Within most individuals languages will usually be "in competition for space and dominance" (Seliger, 1989: 174). However, parents, particularly of very young children, tend to voice much more enthusiastic observations and expectations, such as the following: "Raising children bilingually in a monolingual community requires minimal effort but maximum commitment" (Bérubé, 1998: 4). This pervasive and unbridled enthusiasm and optimism is one of the most striking features apparent in much of the self-help literature. Cautionary voices, such as the following, are much rarer: "Well, I'm sorry to shatter illusions, but raising children to be bilingual is not so easy-peasy as a lot a people seem to simplistically believe" (Lloyd, 1999: 5). Gerda and Dennis, who were planning to raise their children bilingually in English and German describe such a problem that they have experienced:

> Dennis: they did speak German, until one summer. when we had an- an English speaking aupair. staying with us. and after this Julian only wanted to speak English.
> Gerda: and he made this- this decision really when he was three, waking up one morning saying I'm not speaking German to you any more mummy. that was it.
> Dennis: and that was it. and then Charlotte copied him.

Indeed, the best-laid plans of parents may often be upset by the children themselves. My data suggest that only a minority of children actually appreciate and share their parents' commitment to bilingualism. They make their own decisions about their linguistic destiny, which may or may not coincide with their parents' plans. This is also confirmed by Tuominen's (1999) findings that it is usually the children who decided the home language in the families she interviewed rather than the parents.

4. Conclusion

All of the people whose self-reports formed the basis for this research planned for their children to be raised bilingually. In their decisions they draw upon aspects of research into childhood bilingualism that have been popularised in a range of popular books and the media. In these media there has recently been a shift from a rejection of bilingualism as a danger to "normal" development and language

acquisition, towards a valorization of "elite bilingualism". This popularised literature about childhood bilingualism is a vast and extensive body of literature, and consequently a host of messages emerges from these publications, some of which may even contradict each other. Private planning discourses are constituted against those diverse and multiple public discourses. As a result of the valorisation of "elite bilingualism", parents have come to see bilingual education as an investment into their children's future. In order to make the investment work they heavily rely on one of two strategies ("one person – one language" and "home language vs. community language"). The fact that these strategies are best-documented in the research literature as a result of the class-position of many researchers has resulted in an assumption in the wider public that these strategies are superior to other ones. Debates about the existence of a critical period in second language learning have been translated into advice to start the children's language as early as possible. Finally, there is a pervasive assumption that making the right choices and employing the right strategies will result in high levels of balanced bilingualism. It seems that linguistic ideologies that tout bilingualism as a value in itself may be just as debilitating as ideologies that condemn bilingualism as many parents report experiencing a sense of failure when their children reject bilingualism or turn out to be less than perfectly balanced in their two languages.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

,	clause final intonation ("more to come")
.	sentence final falling intonation
CAPS	emphatic stress
@laughingly@	spoken laughingly
-	truncation
…	pause
underlined	analyser's emphasis

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