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**LANGUAGE DOMINANCE IN A SIMULTANEOUS BILINGUAL SYRIAN ARABIC-ENGLISH CHILD****ISRAA SAFYYAH**

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doi: [10.33329/elt.10.5.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/elt.10.5.1)**ABSTRACT**

The present study was designed to examine whether an Arabic English simultaneous bilingual child is considered to have a dominant language, or equally proficient in both. The analysis was based on audio recordings of the child at age 3;4 in separate Arabic and English-language contexts. Three indicators have been used: the mean length of utterance, the upper bound, and the lexical-mixing. The results have shown that the child is approximately balanced with slight English dominance.

**Keywords:** Simultaneous bilingualism, Language dominance, Language acquisition.

**Introduction**

Despite being simultaneously bilingual from birth, or shortly thereafter, many studies of simultaneous bilingual children have found that they probably have a dominant language.

Bilingual children usually perform better in their dominant language and have higher linguistic skills.

Input is the most common cause of language dominance. Several studies have shown a correlation between input and dominance. Researchers suggest that bilinguals fill their linguistic gaps (morphological, lexical, syntactic, etc) by using the equivalent from their dominant language while speaking their non-dominant language (Petersen,1988).

Various measures have been used in these studies, which attempt to determine the dominant language in simultaneous bilingual children, by comparing them across the two languages.

De houwer (1990), for instance, measured the number of pauses in bilingual children's speech.

In her study, Dopke (1992) determined the linguistic dominance of bilinguals by combining morphosyntactic complexity (measured by MLU) with the amount of each language spoken by each parent. Lanze (1992) investigated language dominance by using morphosyntactic complexity and directionality in code-mixing. (as cited in Genesee, Nicoladis& Paradis 1995).

Genesee, Nicoladis, and Paradis 1995 pointed out that the measure of language dominance has not been standardized. Their study measured language dominance among five bilingual French–English children using the MLU, upper bound (the longest utterance produced by the child during one session), word types, and percentages of multimorphemic utterances (MMU).

These criteria led them to conclude that three of the five children were English dominant, one French dominant, and one balanced.



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In this paper, I am going to adopt three measures which are; the mean length of utterance (MLU), the upper bound (UB), and the code-mixing.

According to Brown, the mean length of utterance describes how many morphemes are in each utterance, which were introduced in 1973 to describe how children's speech develops over time. As an indicator of expressive language development, it is calculated by counting the number of morphemes in a single utterance and dividing that number by the total number of utterances in a session.

Upper bound in this context refers to the utterance which has the highest number of morphemes; in other words, the longest utterance produced by the child during one session.

The term code-mixing refers to the mixing of elements of more than one language in a speech during the development of bilingualism. For example, in a longitudinal study done by Mohammad H. Keshavarz and David Ingram (2002) on the early phonological development of a Farsi- English bilingual child. They have found that the child has had two separate phonologies with mutual influence, whereby they claim that the direction of the influence is determined by language dominance.

Keshavarz and Ingram (2002), for example, carried out a longitudinal study on the development of phonological skills in a Farsi-English bilingual child. Based on their finding, the child has developed two distinct phonologies influenced by each other, with language dominance determining the direction of influence.

In the beginning, Farsi was more commonly exposed, so a few English words were stressed in accordance with the iambic pattern of Farsi, but as dominance shifted, so did language influence.

### **The subject**

The scholar's son Nasruddeen is a bilingual Syrian Arabic and English speaker who lives in India and is the son of an Arabic Syrian family who moved to India when Nasruddeen was two months old.

He is exposed to Syrian Arabic and English by his father, both Damascene Syrian Arabic and English by his mother, and only to English by a babysitter. He has joined a nursery when he was about (15) months old where English is primarily spoken by the teachers in addition to some other regional languages.

### **Data collection:**

Audio recordings were made in both Arabic and English, These sessions were spontaneous conversations between the child and adults who sometimes used toys or books to stimulate the dialogue. Two sessions for Arabic were conducted and one session for English, the total time is one hour for each language.

Nasruddeen's sessions were then phonetically transcribed.

### **Procedure**

The collected data were analyzed based on three considerations, which are, MLU, UB, and code-mixing. Firstly, for calculating the mean length of utterance fifty utterances in both languages were analyzed by counting the number of morphemes in each utterance and then dividing the number by the total number of utterances which is fifty. Repeated words were ignored, and yes/ no responses were also ignored. Irregular past tense verbs and irregular plurals were counted as one morpheme depending on the Protocol for Calculating a Mean Length of Utterance Johnson (2005), Fillers such as uh were not counted.

Secondly, for determining the upper bound in the sessions, the same fifty utterances were studied for identifying the utterance which has the highest number of morphemes taking into consideration the same listed procedures in counting the morphemes.



Finally, the same data were tested to monitor the lexical-mixing in both languages. In the Arabic sessions, three borrowed English words in Syrian Arabic were produced by the child, which are: dinosaur, cartoon, and burger. These words were not considered as lexical-mixing.

### Results

#### 1- MLU

The total number of morphemes in the fifty Arabic utterances was 239.

$$239/50=4,78$$

The total number of morphemes in the fifty English utterances was 242.

$$242/50=4,84.$$

#### 2- UB

The upper bound in the Arabic data is the following utterance which consisted of eighteen morphemes.

36-I want to keep all of them like this (moving his hand inside the mixture). I want all of them. Give them to me to use them as balls.

bedd/i: kəll/o:n shan hət/o:n he:k. ʔati:nij/aho:n shan ʔa/xzəm/o:n ku:l/a:t. Want.i all.them because make.them like this give.you.them because i.use.them. ball.s

The upper bound in the English data is the following utterance which consisted of eighteen morphemes.

21-No, this thing. (pointing to another toy) it's not fit now. It's not close now like this.

nou ðis θɪŋ...its not fit nau. its not kloʊz nau laɪk ðis.15m.

#### 3- Code-mixing

In the Arabic data, there were two positions where lexical-mixing occurred.

5- These... all the things, these... the **fire engine**.

hado:l kel al/shayl/a:t hado:l faɪə endʒin. 5m. lexical mixing

These all the.thing.s these .

6-These... the **ambulance**.

hado:l æmbjelens 1m. lexical mixing.

However, there was no lexical-mixing in the English data.

### Discussion:

The results show that the mean length of the utterance of the subject is slightly higher in English than in Arabic. The mean length of utterance is 0.06 higher in English than in Arabic.

The subject had two lexical-mixing in the Arabic sessions, in two positions he shifted from Arabic to English, which may reflect being the child slightly English dominant, It has been suggested by Paradis and Genesee (2007) that bilingual two-year-olds can be sensitive to their interlocutor's language choice, however, they cannot always separate them perfectly by discourse context, which could be due to dominance in one language.

**International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature***(Old Title-Journal of ELT & Poetry)*<http://journalofelt.kypublications.com>**Vol.10.Issue.5. 2022(Sept-Oct)****ISSN:2455-0302**

However, the upper bound has consisted of eighteen morphemes in Arabic, while it has consisted of fifteen morphemes in English, so, this indicator, conversely to lexical mixing, the MLU reflects Arabic dominance.

In conclusion, the results of the subject in both languages were close. This may suggest being the child approximately balanced with very slight English dominance.

**Conclusion**

According to the three adopted criteria, our Syrian Arabic-English child showed close skills in both languages, suggesting that he had approximately balanced linguistic abilities in both languages.

Lexical-mixing indicated a light linguistic dominance for the English language, whereas the upper bound indicated a light Syrian-Arabic dominance. Using the MLU as the last criterion, we found that English had marginally improved over Arabic. Overall, we can say our simultaneous bilingual child acquired the two languages in a balanced manner but with a slight English dominance.

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