Subtractive Bilingualism among Children in Immigrant Families, Family Cohesion and Acculturation: a Critical Overview

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Introduction

The term "subtractive bilingualism" was coined by Lambert in the 1970s, and refers to a process where the acquisition of a second language results in deterioration of the native language (Fillmore 1991, 323). It is a widespread phenomenon among children of immigrants, who will often lose their heritage language partly (limited bilingualism) or entirely (monolingualism in the language that is dominant in the host country). This can lead to intergenerational conflict between children and parents who are non-proficient in the dominant language of the host country and/or wish for the children to retain their heritage language for socio-cultural reasons. This article will examine some of the literature on subtractive bilingualism within children in immigrant families who reside in countries where English is the dominant language, and how this affects family relationships. This article will firstly attempt to explain why children of immigrants experience subtractive bilingualism. Following this, this article will present an overview of some of the existing literature on subtractive bilingualism, acculturation and how these influence family cohesion. Finally, some further issues regarding the studies will be discussed.

Subtractive bilingualism

The transition from bilingualism to monolingualism, that is, subtractive bilingualism, can typically be described as a process stretching across three generations: the first generation of immigrants learn English to communicate outside of the home but speak the heritage language within the home, the second generation become limited bilinguals who speak English fluently but might continue to use the heritage language to speak to their parents, and the third generation become entirely monolingual (Portes and Hao 2002, 890). To understand why children of immigrants lose their native language, one must look at how language ties into nationalism. Fleming and Ansaldo (2020) argue that language has often been central to nationalist struggles, and when "the discourse

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of a uniform 'national' language and culture has been constructed, those individuals, groups, or practices which are judged to be outside the central 'nation' can be positioned as problematic minorities…" (19). In other words, minority groups and minority languages become othered and marginalized in order to maintain a nation that is homogeneous. This line of thinking has been especially prevalent in English speaking societies such as the U.S. (Portes and Hao 2002, 890), where bilingualism historically has been associated with cognitive deficiency. Up until the 1960s it was believed that being bilingual caused one's English to be inadequate because the heritage language would serve no purpose but to hinder one from acquiring English (Portes and Hao 1998, 270). In the latter half of the twentieth century, the field of linguistics began moving away from this belief, with studies investigating how maintaining heritage language can be culturally, cognitively and socially advantageous (Cho 2000, 369), however linguicism, that is, discrimination towards a language, dialect or an accent, continues to influence speakers of minority languages. An example of *institutional* linguicism; linguicism that is embedded systematically into public institutions, is the enforcement of English-only policies in classrooms. Linguicism discourages bilinguals from speaking their native tongue outside of the home, and it is likely that this will cause children to struggle with maintaining their heritage language (Fillmore 1991, 342). To avoid alienation from the majority group, children might even switch to the dominant language and abandon their heritage language completely.

In order to get a sense of how all-encompassing the phenomenon of subtractive bilingualism is, one can look to a survey conducted by Portes and Hao (1998), which examined loss of heritage language in the U.S. The data came from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), a panel of immigrant students from school systems of Miami-Fort Lauderdale and San Diego, and featured 5266 eighth and ninth grade students from 42 different schools, with the total number of ethnicities measuring up to 77. All children had at least one foreign-born parent or were foreign born themselves but had lived in the U.S. for at least five years, meaning that all participants were immigrants from either the second generation or the 1.5-generation. Portes and Hao (1998) found that less than seven percent of the participants were non-proficient in English. Furthermore, over two-thirds of the participants were English-dominant. Very few were fluent bilinguals, meaning that very few were proficient in both languages simultaneously; on the contrary only 16 percent were highly proficient in their heritage language (1998, 273). Therefore, the children might learn English (and adopt American culture) faster than their immigrant parents, which then can lead to dissonant acculturation (Waters et. al. 2010, 1168), that is, a clash between the heritage language

(and culture) endorsed by the parents, and the dominant language (and culture) endorsed by the children. The implications of this will be further discussed in the next section.

What subtractive bilingualism means for family cohesion

Fillmore (1991) argued that children of immigrants are likely to lose their heritage language as soon as they begin attending school, because they are more "vulnerable to the social pressures exerted by people in their social worlds" (342) than adults. She further argues that there are negative associations between subtractive bilingualism and family solidarity.

In her study, over 1100 U.S. immigrant families of different origins were interviewed. The interviews consisted of 45 questions translated into different languages, and of this sample 1001 were used. The sample was then split into two subsamples, a main sample, and a comparison sample. All children in the overall sample had attended pre-school programs in the U.S.; however, children in the comparison group had been in early education programs conducted entirely in their native language, whereas children in the main group had not.

In line with Portes and Hao (1998), Fillmore (1991) found that many of the children experienced heritage language erosion, the main sample more than the comparison sample. Moreover, she found that this language shift affected the integrity of their families. Some children would retain rudimentary words and phrases in their heritage language such as "eat dinner", while most parents knew some English, for example, one mother would communicate with her youngest child in both English and the native language, because the child was not proficient enough to carry a whole conversation in the heritage language (1991, 339). However, many of the parents who were interviewed did not know enough English to communicate their ideas as clearly as they wished to (1991, 338). Thus, the main problem lies in the fact that in many of the families, the parents and the children were not communicatively competent in the same language.

Lippi-Green (1994) defines communicative competence as "the ability to use and interpret language in a stylistically and culturally appropriate manner" (165). When no one are able to communicate effectively in the same language, the parents are unable to socialize the children and convey cultural values, which Fillmore (1991) writes causes "rifts [to] develop and families [to] lose the intimacy that comes from shared beliefs and understandings" (343). What Fillmore (1991) is referring to, and what many of the families experienced, is a form of intergenerational conflict caused by dissonant acculturation. For example, it was found that in some cases, loss of heritage language could lead to alienation of children from their parents (1991, 344). One mother expressed that none of her children, who at that point all were teenagers, could understand or speak the language. The mother would often attempt to admonish one of the sons due to his poor academic

performance, but the son was unable to understand her, which then resulted in verbal and physical clashes. Notably, it was reported that her children did not wish to learn to speak their heritage language at all. On the contrary, they were ashamed of the language and did not wish to acknowledge it (1991, 344). Then, in order to fit into American culture and society, the children abandoned the heritage language, demonstrating how language can intersect with socio-cultural factors. Although the mother in this example was a foreign monolingual, it seems from this, that parents do not have to be foreign monolinguals in order for subtractive bilingualism in children to affect family cohesion. Parents who are bilinguals might also clash with their children because they wish for the children to retain the native language and native culture.

It should be kept in mind that the sample in Fillmore's (1991) study was a convenience sample and it was therefore not representative. Many of the interviewees were acquaintances of the interviewers and thus had a knowledge of the study already; however, the sample still provided rich data that might have been able to tell researchers a lot about what could be going on in other immigrant families.

Boutakidis et. al. (2011) also conducted a study on the relations between subtractive bilingualism and family coherence, and found positive associations between heritage language proficiency and family relationships. They focused on first-generation and second-generation immigrant youths of Chinese and Korean descent. Their sample consisted of 614 ninth grade students from five high schools in the greater Los Angeles area. The participants completed surveys that measured family characteristics, language fluency, quality of communication and parental respect.

In agreement with a lot of literature on heritage language proficiency among ethnic minority youths, they found that adolescents and parents had a significant language gap, which made communication difficult – this was true for both first-generation and second-generation immigrants, implying that linguistic assimilation is likely to happen to any ethnic minority youth. This supports the notion that children are more vulnerable to the social pressure of assimilation. As for family coherence, native fluency was positively associated with respect for ones' mother and father. This ties into preservation of the heritage cultures; some non-Western cultures place great emphasis on respect towards elders, which is reflected in the language through the use of honorifics, pronouns and other terms of respect. Boutakidis et. al. (2011) write that parental respect is often "conveyed through a facesaving style of intrafamilial communication, whereby children avoid causing embarrassment or shame in their parents" (129). Results indicate that preserving the heritage language and thus the terms of respect also strengthens the respect youths show towards their parents, and a failure to use these terms can potentially cause conflict. This is another example

of dissonant acculturation. Following this, the quality of communication the participants had with their parents positively predicted respect for the parents. Thus, as Boutakidis et. al. (2011) argue "adolescent native fluency [goes] beyond the functional pragmatics of communication, that is to say, beyond the basic role of being able to understand and express oneself in another language" (2011, 137). Rather, in agreement with some of Fillmore's (1991) findings, native proficiency ties into cultural understanding and respect for that culture, which in turn creates closer family bonds.

One must note that this study is quite narrow, seeing as it only centers around youths of Chinese and Korean descent. In the same vein, parental respect is a factor that only makes sense to look at when dealing with cultures that emphasize this aspect, such as many East-Asian cultures. Regardless, the findings are very relevant for the study of bilingualism in immigrant families.

Selective acculturation and consonant acculturation

Other studies have further nuanced the discussion on subtractive bilingualism in immigrant children and their families, by examining what type of linguistic acculturation is positively associated with family relationships.

Selective acculturation

Portes and Hao (2002) conducted a study in which they argued that it was the simultaneous proficiency of both English and the native language that improved family solidarity. This was a longitudinal study, and could thus examine long-term effects. Three surveys were included in the study: two student surveys and one parent survey. Like Portes and Hao (1998), they extracted the data from the CILS, which was based in Miami-Fort Lauderdale and San Diego. The two student surveys were conducted three years apart, with the first survey sampling eighth and ninth grade students, and the follow-up survey featuring the same students who by then had either graduated from high school or dropped out. The parental survey was conducted at the same time as the follow-up student survey, with participants being the parents of approximately 50 percent of the children in the follow-up survey. The surveys established language proficiency and adaptation within the children, as well as parental English knowledge and parental interaction with children, which was then used to measure family conflict and family solidarity.

Portes and Hao (2002) found that it was the simultaneous mastery of both English and the heritage language that was associated with positive family relations, rather than limited bilingualism, English monolingualism and foreign monolingualism. Fluent bilinguals displayed stronger family solidarity and experienced less family conflict, whereas English monolingualism increased conflict. They refer to fluent bilingualism as a form of selective acculturation, which occurs when "parents

and children both gradually learn [the host nation's] ways while remaining embedded, at least in part, in the ethnic community (Waters et. al. 2010, 1169). In other words, preserving aspects of the heritage language and culture together with the acquisition of the English language and host culture was positively associated with family cohesion (2002, 906). This may be due to the fact that parents want their children to learn English because they associate communicative competence in the language with avoiding being linguistically discriminated against and thus succeeding in an English speaking society. At the same time, the parents also want the children to be proficient in the heritage language, for example so the children can communicate with them in the parents' preferred language, talk to older family members such as grandparents or family living in the country of origin, and as Fillmore (1991) and Boutakidis et. al. (2011) found, retain the ties to the heritage culture.

Selective acculturation can result in hybrid varieties such as Chinglish (Chinese English) and Konglish (Korean English) or code switching within the home, which is a practice wherein the speaker will switch between two or more languages, dialects or accents. Furthermore, within homes where the children are bilinguals, the children can act as language brokers for family members who are non-proficient in English. Brokering is a common phenomenon within immigrant families, defined as a form of interpersonal communication where "a third party provides communication among different linguistic and/or cultural agents" (McQuillan and Tse 1995, 195). Studies on language brokering have demonstrated varying results on benefits and drawbacks, suggesting that more research is needed. Nevertheless, Cho (2000) reports in her study centered around Korean American college students, that those participants who brokered for their parents had a more trusting relationship with them, and that the children often became a source of emotional support for their parents and siblings (382). As McQuillan and Tse (1995) write, language brokers often take on various parental duties for their family, which establishes a close relationship between the brokers and their parents (204).

One thing of note was that students from intact families or families that owned their homes were overrepresented in the study; however, the correlation between these variables and the follow-up participation was very small (Portes and Hao 2002, 895). Furthermore, the linguistic proficiency of the participants was self-reported, and although this has been deemed a reliable measure of

language ability and is the standard measure employed by large surveys (2002, 895) assessments may differ from individual to individual.

Consonant acculturation

On the other hand, Tseng and Fuligni (2000) argued that it was language use patterns that affected family relations. They write that "[t]he mix of language abilities and preferences among parents and children gives rise to different language use patterns within immigrant families" (466), such as communicating predominantly in English, communicating in the native language or communicating in both languages. In their study, they examined whether the relationship between parents and children in immigrant families differs according to these patterns. The data they used stemmed from a larger project that similarly investigated family relationships and academic adjustment among ethnic minorities. The sample consisted of 626 students of East Asian, Filipino and Latin American origins from a North California school district attending sixth-grade, eight-grade or tenth-grade, and the participants were equally split in terms of sex. Most of the students were second-generation immigrants, and about a third of each group were 1.5-generation immigrants. The study was a longitudinal study, thus two years following the initial questionnaire, most of the eight-grade and tenth-grade students returned to participate in the second part of the study. The study assessed the language that was predominantly spoken between parents and children, family cohesion and conflict.

The study identified three patterns of language use, namely both parents and children speaking English (55 percent), both parents and children speaking the heritage language (25 percent) and parents and children speaking different languages (20 percent). They found that adolescents who mutually communicated in the same language as their parents had greater cohesion and discussion values than those who communicated in different languages, and consequently miscommunication and emotional distance was associated with non-reciprocal language use. Indeed, they write that children who were reluctant to engage in discussions with their parents could even utilize the English language as a form of barrier between their parents (Tseng and Fuligni 2000, 473). Those who communicated in their *heritage* language had closer relationships with their mothers and engaged in more discussions with parents, in comparison to those who mutually communicated in English, thus falling in line with the other studies. Tseng and Fuligni (2000) write that this might be due to a shared struggle to adapt within the U.S. between family members, thus resulting in them placing "greater emphasis on family closeness and mutual obligation" (466).

However, the longitudinal analyses revealed that 28 percent of the participants had experienced a language shift within the families, and this is where Tseng and Fuligni's (2000)

findings differ from Portes and Hao's (2002). Within the majority of the families who had experienced a language shift, it was the parents who had switched from the heritage language to English, thus moving from nonreciprocal language use patterns to reciprocal patterns. This is a form of consonant acculturation, which "occurs when the children and parents both learn [the dominant] culture and gradually abandon their home language and 'old country' ways at about the same pace" (Waters et. al. 2010, 1169). In this case, it is important to separate language and culture; some families may experience consonant acculturation in regards to the language while still retaining ties to their heritage culture and some families abandon both. Notably, mutually speaking the same language two years later was associated with closer relationships between parents and children and higher levels of discussions, regardless of the language. On the other hand, emotionally distant families who spoke English with each other in the initial sample, tended to shift to a non-reciprocal language use pattern, with the parents shifting back to their native language. It then seems that mutually reciprocal language use positively influenced family cohesion, regardless of the language this took place in. This might be because some families prioritize communicating in the same language over heritage language preservation, or because the parents deem English monolingualism to be the most beneficial to the children. As mentioned before, being communicatively competent in English is often associated with being successful in English speaking societies because one can avoid overt and systemic linguicism, and by that logic, families might adopt the English language within the home to ensure the best future for the child.

This result is further exemplified in a study by Usita and Blieszner (2002) which aimed to examine immigrant families' strategies for minimizing the miscommunication caused by loss of heritage language. Within this study, they interviewed 10 mother-daughter dyads to study their relationship. They found that language acculturation took place within the dyads, with the mothers preferring the native language, while the daughters preferred English, and this created a language gap. In line with all the other studies, both parties had difficulties explaining themselves to the other, and the daughters would often feel frustrated, annoyed and impatient with their mothers' flawed English. Many of the mothers expressed "dissatisfaction and sorrow that they and their daughters sometimes failed to understand each other" (2002, 275). However, Usita and Bliezsner (2002) further found that the pairs had developed their own strategies to reduce miscommunication. Four broad strategies could be found within the pairs, one of these being the daughters helping to improve the mothers' English. One daughter spoke about how she and her

siblings would assist their mother and help her learn English while working with her at their common workplace (2002, 281), which had brought them closer.

It is unclear why Tseng and Fuligni's (2000) results differ from Portes and Hao' (2002); it might have to do with the fact that an overall language shift only occurred in 28 percent of the families; however, more research on this is needed. What both studies reveal however, is the diversity of immigrant families, the ways in which they communicate with each other, and the strategies they employ to cope and adjust to the dominant culture and language. One can perceive this particular strategy of leaving behind the heritage language as something that is negative; nevertheless, it is important to recognize that consonant acculturation is merely a mechanism employed to cope with the pressure of assimilation, and families who do this must not be frowned upon. The real problem lies in how speakers of minority languages often are marginalized and discriminated against, thus causing children and parents to have to come up with these different strategies in the first place.

Further issues

A few additional issues must be noted. Firstly, this overview is quite narrow, and does not account for nearly every aspect of subtractive bilingualism and its relationship with family cohesion. In line with this, this article is not representative of the general immigrant population in English speaking countries, or even the immigrant population in the U.S. Immigrant families are not a monolithic group. Rather, the experiences of immigrant families differ vastly across variables such as socioeconomic status, geographical location, whether the family is intact, country of origin, the generational status of the individuals, sex, gender, etc. These factors tend to intersect and are therefore difficult to tease apart, and one would need to examine more studies that feature participants from different backgrounds for results that are more representative.

As was briefly mentioned above, one must also bear in mind that although much of the literature on subtractive bilingualism within immigrant families postulated that language and culture go hand in hand, and thus a loss of heritage language leads to a loss of heritage culture, native proficiency does not equal a good cultural understanding. Rather, it is possible that one can lose the heritage language and still retain knowledge and feel pride towards the culture, and one can be communicatively competent in the native language and still want to distance oneself from the heritage culture.

During the process of writing this article, it was noted that literature highlighting how children of immigrants as well as their parents minimize subtractive bilingualism or cope with the phenomenon is underrepresented. Most of the literature is centered around its *consequences* on family

cohesion, and although these are important to shed light on, this tendency bears the implication that immigrant families often are dysfunctional. Centering strategies immigrant families employ to avoid intergenerational conflict is essential and prevents the experiences of immigrant families from being problematized.

Conclusion

This article aimed to examine subtractive bilingualism within children in immigrant families and how it affects relationships between children and parents by looking at some of the existing literature on the topic. It found that subtractive bilingualism is a widespread issue among children of immigrants due to nationalism and linguicism. This causes the second language to become dominant as the heritage language decreases and in some cases deteriorates completely.

The studies that were included in this article suggested that subtractive bilingualism could influence family cohesion negatively, and would often lead to intergenerational conflict caused by dissonant acculturation, whereas proficiency in the heritage language would improve family relations. Portes and Hao (2002) additionally argued that a simultaneous mastery of the native language *and* English – a form of selective acculturation – was positively associated with family cohesion. On the other hand, Tseng and Fuligni (2000) found that some families would shift to an entirely English language use pattern, which is a form of consonant acculturation, and this would also improve family relations. From these results, it is evident that immigrant families have many different and diverse ways and methods of communicating with one another despite children and parents being proficient in and/or preferring two different languages, such as code mixing and having children help the parents develop their English.

Finally, more research on these methods immigrant families employ to communicate with each other across language gaps is needed. While literature on the consequences of subtractive bilingualism is necessary it also gives off the impression that immigrant families tend to be dysfunctional, when they are a diverse group wherein many will employ creative strategies to meet communication problems.

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