

Bilingual Education, Language Maintenance, and Language Loss:  
Exploring issues surrounding bilingual education in the United States

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My mother lives in a small but long established agricultural community of under 1000 people that is located about 60 miles west of Phoenix on the old road to Los Angeles. The town has a post office, a community center that serves daily meals to its senior citizens, a library, an elementary school. High school students are bused to Wickenburg, 20 miles away. My mother has been the librarian in Aguila since about 1983. The library is large, air conditioned, well stocked, and used by the school as well as being one of the town's main focal points. The population of Aguila is about half Anglo, most of them retired people, and half Hispanic, families of agricultural workers who live there permanently or are migratory. My mother is in daily contact with the Hispanic community. She told me, for instance, about her young Hispanic friend and how she came to work at the library. Florence has known the girl since she was a child attending elementary school. One day the girl came in and told Florence that she was now 14 and would have to work at the local package store, which stays open till 10 PM, out on the main highway. When Florence learned about the job at the package store she told the girl she could have a job in the library after school for the same number of hours and the same amount of pay (which came out of her own) as she would get at the liquor store. So she helped Florence in the library from then on until some other events occupied her life and then Florence hired her little sister.

My mother and the Hispanic community in Aguila are somewhat fascinated by each other because mother uses her Spanish surname, Alonso, from her grandfather, Domingo Alonso, a Spaniard from Galicia, Spain. But she is light haired and blue eyed, and her history and education clearly mark her as Anglo. I remember observing how the Mexican workers reacted to Florence when they would come in to the library in their work clothes just before closing, one bringing to her a book that was overdue. Florence extended her hand palm up, telling him he

owed her the 10 or 20 cents on the book. Looking into her face while reaching deep into his pocket, he somehow became a small boy fishing for small change, which he deposited into her hand, free again to borrow another book.

The library has an extensive collection of books, magazines, and children's stories in Spanish, a collection used so thoroughly that, according to the librarian, it requires constant reshelving. My contact with Aguila's librarian has brought me around to thinking about the elementary school and the children there. How do the Hispanic children do in school? Are other authority figures as understanding as my mother? How do migrant families cope with their children's education? What is the situation with bilingual education in Aguila? Are Spanish speaking children learning in Spanish, in English, in both languages? If so, for how many years of their schooling? What are the differences in achievement levels for the Hispanic and the Anglo children? Are the Anglo children learning Spanish, or learning in Spanish? What are the demographics of the student body? What happens to the Hispanic children when they graduate from elementary school and are bused out of Aguila to Wickenburg, a larger town 20 miles away where they attend middle and high school?

Thinking about my final thesis project for the MA in Composition Studies, I would like to go back to that town and do research in the elementary school, research related to bilingual education. There are several drawbacks. First I don't speak Spanish and the local teachers don't know me, but they do know Florence and she could be my spokesperson in the community. Second, I don't know now what specifically I would look for and this is where this paper comes in. Third, I don't know if bilingual education is a concern in composition studies and if I could adjust my research questions to suit the needs of a composition studies project. My background is in TESL and I completed the MA/TEFL program at SFSU at a time when a thesis project

wasn't an option. My interest in researching an issue in bilingual education goes back to my earlier training in TESL.

I am using this paper as a preliminary exploration into the literature on bilingual education. Through this paper I hope to reach an understanding of the basic issues surrounding bilingual education, the social policy issues in regard to immigrant languages and the cognitive theories that support the social policy. In order to place the current issues in a historical context, I will begin with traditions governing the assimilation of immigrants into mainstream America, the old metaphor of the melting pot. I am seeing this paper as the introductory chapter of a thesis paper, a chapter that introduces the issues that will be treated more in-depth in subsequent chapters.

The paper is organized around exploring social theory—how American society views minority languages, how these views become government policies of various sorts. Researchers have classified our and other government's policies into a topology of bilingual education programs, providing a convenient framework through which to explore actual programs as examples of each policy type. I will explore some programs in terms of the assimilation and integration models that are built into the policies themselves. Lastly, I will explore some hypotheses regarding the relationship between language and cognition—the correlation between academic progress of limited English proficient (LEP) students and school instruction when in the students' first language (L1).

Fishman (1981) and Fillmore (1991a, 1991b) describe the importance of language in the acculturation process of immigrant peoples and how they assimilate into American society. Traditionally, the operative metaphor for America is the melting pot, a crucible that melts down a mixture of foreign cultures as metals and comes out with an entirely new metal one that

signifies American culture. To continue the metaphor the liquefied metal is poured into molds and left to harden. So immigrants coming into this country get figuratively remolded into something essentially American, which involves being recast as new metal and then wrought into new forms: "Made in America."

The melting pot theory sees language as a problem; the language of minority groups within national society is a problem for speakers of the language and for the nation as a whole (Hornberger, 1987:206). Children of immigrants are put into language submersion (sink or swim) situations where the goal is to learn English as soon as possible. In society's view the foreign language is a problem that needs remedy, and while there is no effort made to preserve the old country language, there is also no difficulty with learning English. Many immigrant children received years of education in the old country, can read, write, and have fully developed academic and analytical skills which they then transfer with energy and determination to learning English. While the old world language is still spoken at home, acquiring English gives these children access to the English speaking outside world. English is added to their language repertoires resulting in additive bilingualism.

Fishman describes how in the past language wasn't even an economic hindrance for most adult immigrants (1981:521). In the beginning of the 20th century our economy could afford immigrant adults employment even before they learned English. But in the current decades our economy can't afford full employment to its native speaking population. In our present economy knowing English doesn't guarantee employment to the immigrant or the native speaker, but not knowing English might insure not getting employment.

In the 60's and 70's national consciousness focused on repressed ethnicity with cultural exotica emerging from mainstream America along with Black pride, Black is Beautiful and the

rights of all disempowered people. Fishman writes about the re-ethnification or heightened ethnicity experienced at the grassroots and pseudo-intellectual levels, that repressed ethnicity must ultimately "snap back" (1981:519). Fishman attributes this change to deep historical movements, 3,000 years of Euro-Mediterranean social theory with respect to the nature of ethnicity and its recurring link to language, which I understand as the rise of social/cultural determination based on language, culture, and mass migration of peoples.

Social policy in the 60's and 70's moved away from seeing the language of minorities as problems, the traditional melting pot way of dealing with other languages, and toward seeing minority languages as a right to which speakers are entitled (Hornberger, 1987:206). A national Bilingual Education Act was first funded in 1967. In 1974 the U.S. Supreme Court reviewing *Lau v. Nichols* concluded that learning English and getting an equitable education are not the same thing. Students who lack English language proficiency are denied due process when the focus of their education is on learning English, denying them an education equal to native speakers' (Fishman, 1981:518). Title 5 Bilingual Education Act mandated bilingual elementary and Head Start Programs for getting limited English proficiency students ready for school. Bilingual education gives children of limited English proficiency time to learn content area and be taught in their primary languages at the same time that they're learning English. With these programs in place why does Fishman claim that schools have not fostered minority language maintenance in the U.S., not even in their bilingual guises (1981:517)? Why does Fillmore claim that the current national language policy is destroying LEP students' knowledge of their primary language and consequently destroying their family life (1991a)?

Fishman, writing in the late 70's, saw a glimmer of hope in a possible future shift toward the third and most enlightened social position, a multilingual America as being in the public

good, in which minority languages are seen as potential resources for the whole nation (1981:522, Hornberger, 1987:206). The Whorfian hypothesis most effectively supports this viewpoint, that each truly different language sparks a truly different reality and worldview among its speakers (Fishman, 1981:524). Fishman found origins in the 1800's. In the face of the encroaching mechanization and standardization of the Industrial Revolution, Herder saw language diversity as worth fostering because "all the qualities that reflect what is nobly, creatively, and tenderly human are preserved and fostered only by the varieties of languages that characterized all...peoples" (524).

According to Congressman Paul Simon, the touchstone of a policy like this would be an enrichment bilingual education program, "not in terms of assistance to the poor, to non-English speakers or to ethnics, but as a distinct contribution to the general diplomatic, commercial, intellectual, and esthetic welfare of the country at large" (Fishman, 1981:524). But economic changes of the 90's and the upsurge of the English Only movement have pushed us farther than ever from this goal.

The following topology that classifies bilingual education programs into seven different types clarifies the issues behind Fillmore's and Fishman's criticisms (Mohanty, 1990:43-44).

Type 1. The mainstream program of instruction in the majority language medium for the majority children. (No language change.)

Type 2. The submersion program of the majority language for the majority children with a strong assimilation goal, forcing the children to "sink" or "swim" and leading to language shift. (The melting pot model.)

Type 3. The segregationist program of instruction in the minority language to minority children seeking to develop monolingualism. (Perhaps the segregated educational model for Blacks

before 1954.)

Type 4. The language shelter or mother tongue maintenance program of the minority language (for the first several years of schooling) with the majority language sought to be developed as second language (L2). This program has the societal goal of promoting bilingualism in a pluralistic integrative framework and providing equality of opportunity. (Desired U.S. model that would result in additive bilingualism.)

Type 5. The immersion program of minority language for majority children promoting bilingualism for the integrative and instrumental purposes of enriching both L1 and L2 of the majority children. (Canadian model, French for English speaking children that results in additive bilingualism.)

Type 6. The transitional program of education beginning with the minority language but later (and progressively) making a complete switch over to the majority language. Although complete monolingualism is not the goal, the program is a form of soft human assimilation of the minority language and culture into the majority culture slowly leading to language shift. (Current U.S. transitional bilingual education model that results in language replacement.)

Type 7. The functional or utopian bilingual program for the majority as well as minority children providing instruction in both languages. The amount of time and effort allotted to each language depends upon an evaluation of the required support for each language with the goal of enriching both.

Additive bilinguals retain their cultural identity and first language as they add a second language. Merino defines language shift as "the change from the habitual use of one language to that of another," with the focus on language change as it affects large communities (1983:178). Language loss involves the same change in the use of language but focuses on the individual

(Merino:278). Language loss has always occurred in immigrant families. In the process of changing from one language to another, speakers begin with additive bilingualism, move through processes of language shift to subtractive bilingualism and language loss. But the process takes place gradually over many generations. Fillmore's research confirms that this change is speeding up. Early preschool education, early exposure to television, and influence of the peer group has resulted in subtractive bilingualism in one generation (1991a:326). Subtractive bilinguals lose their mother tongue in favor of acquiring the new language and culture. Retractive bilinguals reject the new language and culture and attempt to speak their first language exclusively (Cook, 1990:2).

The topology makes the distinction between bilingualism for integrative or assimilative purposes. Mohanty defines integration of a minority group within a larger social system as a result of the minority group choosing to retain its own cultural identity, moving at the same time towards a positive relation with the larger society (1983:38). "Cultural and linguistic integration in a plural society would be viewed in terms of a sense of positive self-identity coupled with a positive identification with others, with the positive feelings reciprocated by the people of the dominant or majority culture" (Mohanty:38). Language and cultural differences would bring causes to celebrate for both the minority group and the majority group. Without a perception of the value in maintaining their own culture, contact between linguistic groups leads to assimilation into the majority culture and to deculturation (Mohanty:38).

Assimilation is associated with language shift, language loss and dominant monolingualism at the societal level and involves loss of self-esteem and loss of identity at the personal level. Although multi-tongued the U.S. has always been officially monolingual and this policy is no stronger than today. English Only laws have been passed in most of the 50 states.

The education of non-English speaking children in America has always been with the goal of teaching them English to assimilate them into American culture, whether or not at the expense of the loss of the native language. Most educators feel that the problems non-English speaking children have in school can be remedied by having them learn English faster and earlier, preferable before starting kindergarten, thus the federally funded Head Start programs for school readiness.

The long-range goal of bilingual education in America, the Type 6 transitional programs, continues to be cultural assimilation and language shift if not outright monolingualism. Fishman, Fillmore and Mohanty all claim that transitional bilingual programs, all assimilation programs, lead to loss of self esteem as a corollary to loss of the primary language and culture. Assimilation presupposes the devaluing and ultimate rejection of a primary culture when that culture is devalued by society at large, by the media, and in textbooks. In the past these forces of assimilation have taken place gradually, over several generations, so that damage to family life is minimal. At present they are speeded up so as to take place within one generation and have done more damage to family life (Fillmore, 1991a).

In the U.S. bilingual education comes in two packages, language maintenance programs and language transition programs. Transitional programs employ a non-English mother tongue as a co-medium of instruction until three years later when the pupil's English is good enough to become the sole medium of instruction. Fishman considers the Bilingual Education Act a doublespeak for anglicization of non-English speakers (1981:517). Essentially a language replacement programs, the transitional bilingual education, acts not for but against bilingualism because it displaces the non-English mother tongues from the language of instruction and replaces it entirely with English (Fishman:517). The language of the school soon replaces the

language of the home often before parents have learned English themselves. By claiming one thing and producing another, perhaps these programs are subtle ways to defuse the rising awareness of ethnicity discussed earlier.

The National Association of Bilingual Educators' No Cost Research Study explored language maintenance preschool programs, transitional bilingual programs, and English only programs to discover whether or not the language predominately used at school was affecting the language of choice for home use. They found most distinctly that children learning and using English in preschools quickly shifted their home language to English as well, even when their parents knew little English, a shift that the researchers felt was negatively affecting the quality of home life and parent/child relationships. Parents of children who had attended bilingual and English only preschools described their children as having baby level proficiency in their native languages (Fillmore, 1991a).

Educators have long deplored the fact that children of non-English speaking parents have low-level proficiencies in the cognitive academic skills required for success in school. Educators sought treatment for this by pushing for government programs that focus on English language and school readiness skills. But actual research has found that promotion of the mother-tongue language is more desirable than promotion of English in developing the cognitive skills required for success in school and in the majority language (Cummins, 1979).

Language maintenance programs, Type 4, would be a better way to develop the cognitive skills necessary for schooling. But they presuppose an integrative as opposed to an assimilative goal and work best in societies that have multilingualism and cultural pluralism as national policies, examples being Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, India, Malaysia. From a social psychological perspective the maintenance of the mother-tongue of the minorities is desirable for

their positive integration into the multilingual and pluralistic society (Mohanty, 1990:39). But although pluralistic is fact, American social policy has never embraced nor promulgated cultural pluralism.

True bilingual education would educate the majority as well as the minority in two languages, with the second language being any one of the minority languages predominant in that region. Thus, an ideal bilingual educational program in San Francisco, for example, would have bilingual magnet schools for majority and minority pupils with each school teaching a different minority language, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Filipino, as do the French immersion elementary schools in Canada and schools in 20 American cities that split the school day between English and an L2 (New York Times, 1989:1).

Researchers like Cummins wondered why low proficiency children in 2nd language programs, such as the English speaking children enrolled in total immersion French programs, had no comparable lack of proficiency in their cognitive academic skills. The difference seemed to indicate that the proficiency levels of the primary languages, not the second language, insured well-developed cognitive academic skills. Thus, the U.S. educators have been pushing a treatment that aggravated rather than alleviated the problem. Primary language maintenance for as long as possible, rather than transition to English as early as possible, is the key to improving the cognitive academic proficiency in English as well as all around analytical skills which are the basis of schooling. A high degree of first language ability is necessary for optimum second language learning; the first language is crucial to success in school (Campos, 1985:83). But in recent years national language policy has moved further away from rather than closer to this model. Children are still pushed to learn English as fast and as early as possible and language maintenance is left to the home as its responsibility or to chance.

Several research studies confirm the results of the No Cost Study. Carpinteria Unified School District in Carpinteria, CA has brought Spanish dominant preschool children up to a level of readiness for school which compares favorably with the level attained by the English-speaking children in the same community by developing oral language skills in Spanish to as high a degree as possible (Campos, 1985:83). Their experience demonstrates that children who enter school without a firm grasp of Spanish tended to mix the first language with the second language, English. Their program emphasizes keeping the languages separate to develop an awareness of appropriate usage of each language and to avoid mixing them (Campos:85).

Merino found that bilingual children who at kindergarten were balanced in Spanish and English, by grades four were still at kindergarten levels in Spanish, but had improved significantly in English. As they progressed in age they did not, as might be expected, continue parallel development of both languages (1983:284). She concluded that language loss was an outcome of use patterns (292). Children who used both English and Spanish with parents, relatives, and friends at school demonstrated the greatest loss (292). Most severe loss occurred among children who used both languages with most speakers, not identifying one language with one speaker (293). Children who identified individual speakers with Spanish showed the greatest gains. Dr. Jain at SFSU discussed (in class) how children should identify one person with one language if they're going to acquire proficiency in more than one language, a strategy he was using with his daughter. Loss is more likely if the input to the child consists of both languages freely interchanged by the same speaker. Parents who speak even limited English to their children at early ages to encourage learning English are in effect discouraging learning the mother tongue.

Cook studied the relationship between home language use and the acquisition of

academic English and concluded that the development of the first language is positively related to acquisition of the second language, and that literacy in the first language is positively related to literacy in the second language (1990:11). She found a strong correlation between ability to and enjoyment of reading in Spanish and scores on English reading and language tests (15). The amount of Spanish spoken in the home had no relationship to success on the tests, but the amount that the father spoke showed a significant relationship to measures of English language development (17). The amount of Spanish the mother spoke had no relationship. In Hispanic households fathertalk is structurally different than mothertalk, contains long complex sentences with many embedded clauses, as fathers are not interrupted by family demands. From mothers children hear only short simple sentences that refer to the situation at hand. She found a significant correlation between number of years of fathers' education and the fathers' participation in family conversation, while mothers' years of schooling showed no correlation. Fathers' education had more direct effect on children's success in school than fathers' occupation (Cook:20).

Cummins carefully researched the central question of why a home-school language switch results in high levels of functional bilingualism and academic achievement in middle-class majority children, yet leads to inadequate command of both L1 and L2 and poor academic achievement in many minority language children (1979:22). He proposes two linguistic explanatory hypotheses, the threshold hypothesis and the developmental interdependence hypothesis, that help account for the different outcomes of immersion and submersion programs and that explain whether or not the academic progress of children of limited English-speaking ability will be promoted more effectively if actual instruction is in their L1 (1979:226).

The threshold hypothesis explains how access to two languages in early childhood can

accelerate aspects of cognitive growth. Cummins postulates threshold levels of linguistic competence which bilingual children must attain both in order to avoid cognitive deficits and to allow the potential beneficial aspects of becoming bilingual to influence their cognitive growth (1979:229). Inability to attain a lower threshold level of bilingual competence would result in negative cognitive effects, such as the semilingualism or double semilingualism that Fillmore found among Vietnamese children (1991a). The bilingual child's competence in a language is sufficiently weak to impair the quality of her interaction with her educational environment through that language (Cummins, 1979:230). Attainment of the lower level would imply that children's surface L2 competence, their basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), have translated into deeper levels of cognitive competence in the language, their cognitive/academic language proficiency level (CALP). A higher threshold level would allow children that develop high levels of L2 skills, which sometimes takes place in total immersion programs, to reap the cognitive benefits of their bilingualism with higher IQ scores. In minority language situations a prerequisite for attaining a higher threshold level of bilingual competence is maintenance of L1 skills (Cummins, 1979:232).

The developmental interdependence hypothesis proposes an interaction between the language of instruction and the type of competence the child develops in his L1 prior to school. The level of L2 competence that a bilingual child attains is partially a function of the type of competence the child has developed in L1 at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins (Cummins, 1979:233). Possible attainment of the threshold level of L2 competence depends on the cognitive/academic level attained in the mother tongue. This hypothesis explains the transferability from one language to another of extracting meaning from printed text, as Cook also found. Recently arrived immigrant children from Mexico whose Spanish is firmly

established are more successful in acquiring English skills than native-born Mexican-Americans (Cummins, 1979:235). The use of Spanish at home resulted in high levels of Spanish skills at no cost to English achievement, while the use of English at home resulted in a deterioration of Spanish skills but no improvement in English (Cummins, 1979:236).

Cummins' hypotheses are based on varying functional linguistic competencies, uses of language that result in different language proficiencies. Halliday found language to have a representational function that is concerned with the processing and communication of information (in Cummins, 1979:239). Language also has interpersonal and ideational or logical functions. The ideational function specifies the semantic and logical relations between subject and predicate of a sentence, while the interpersonal function relates the logical component to the requirements of the listener (Cummins, 1979:239). Cummins coded these differences as cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS).

What I have understood from Cummins, and how Mohanty applies Cummins' theories, is that demonstrated face-to-face competence in the primary language, the BICS, in the primary language is not sufficient for success in school, whether learning is taking place either in the L1 or an L1. Language proficiency apart from BICS, that is the cognitive/academic language skills, the CALP, are required for success in school tasks. The child, who starts out with BICS in the mother tongue and through schooling achieves the necessary level of CALP in the L1, is ready to learn an L2 in a school context. But unless she has attained a CALP level in the L1 the child is at risk academically if required to learn an L2 in a school context and to learn at school. CALP as opposed to BICS involves the ability to "process linguistic material in context-reduced cognitively demanding situations...that [have] greater medium orientation rather than message

orientation, to control thought processes, facilitate intentional learning in general and language learning in particular" (Mohanty, 1990:41).

Cummins' Interactional Model of bilingual education brings together background variables such as parental attitudes toward L2, child input variables such as motivation and conceptual linguistic knowledge, child process variables such as competence in L1 and L2, with the educational treatment variables of teacher's expectations and the language program in use, to result in educational outcomes--cognitive, linguistic and affective outcomes (1979:241).

Cummins' hypotheses provide the theoretical underpinnings for Fillmore's, Cook's, Campos's and Mohanty's research into bilingual education.

Cummins discusses the importance of affective factors such as motivation, identity, and student empowerment in bilingual education (1986). Children who immigrate late appear to have better academic prospects than children of similar socioeconomic status born in this country. One explanation is that their L1 CALP skills provide a better foundation for L2 CALP skills acquisition as already noted. Another explanation is affective rather than cognitive. Because older immigrant children have not experienced devaluation of their identity in the societal institutions like the schools, as have the children born in this country, they are more motivated and have higher self esteem (Cummins:33). Successful bilingual programs emphasize and use the student's L1. Are these programs successful because they promote the L1 cognitive/academic skills or because they reinforce the minority children's cultural identities? The extent to which students' language and culture are incorporated into the school program constitutes a significant predictor of academic success (Cummins:34). Successful bilingual programs take into account culturally conditioned learning styles, actively involve parents in the child's learning process, and empower the community through its interaction with the schools

(Cummins:36).

Why do educators continue to support, and government programs continue to operate, under the principles that minority students suffer from insufficient exposure to English and that the earlier and faster they learn English and assimilate into American culture the better they'll do in school, when all evidence suggests the opposite—that incorporation of minority language and culture into the academic program enhances minority student progress? Cummins details the social function that this argument serves:

A major reason for the...resistance to bilingual [maintenance, Type 4] programs is that the incorporation of minority languages and cultures into school programs confers status and power (jobs...) on the minority group. [S]uch programs contravene the established pattern of dominant/dominated group relations. Within democratic societies...contradictions between the rhetoric of equality and the reality of domination must be obscured. [C]onventional wisdom such as the insufficient exposure hypothesis become immune from critical scrutiny and incompatible evidence is either ignored or dismissed (1986:35).

This extremely powerful and essentially subversive insight makes plain Fishman's claims that "bilingual education is a policy and power base for ethnic proto-elites who refuse to let their clientele integrate into the mainstream" (1981:518).

The research and studies I've looked into have truly opened my eyes to a possible hidden social agenda of bilingual education programs. From this research I have seen that Head Start and bilingual education programs are double-sided. Is the current policy producing an underclass of the very class it's purporting to help? I am very interested in seeing if and how this agenda gets played out in Aguila, Arizona. One outstanding question I still have is how the critical period for accent free language acquisition might enter into this picture.

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