

The Bilingual Child: some Issues and Perspectives by Tej K. Bhatia and William C. Ritchie (1999)

The position of bilingual children in language research

- Often child language and infant bilingualism only receive marginal consideration from linguists:
- Child language research is predominantly devoted to the monolingual child
- Lately growing research interest in child language and bilingualism
- Interest in the theory of grammars in contact and in Universal Grammar changed the nature of research on childhood bilingualism

What is bilingualism?

Bhatia uses the following definition for bilingualism by Bloomfield (1933):

Bilingualism is native-like control of two languages.

The concept of "native-like control" of a language is "used in the sense of a balanced bilingual with an appropriate pragmatic dominance of one language". Therefore "balanced" cannot be understood in the absolute sense. One language will always dominate.

Lenneberg's Critical period Hypothesis (1967)

Lenneberg's **Critical Period Hypothesis** claims that there is a period in the maturation of the human organism, lasting from approximately two years to puberty, during which effortless and complete language acquisition is possible on the basis of exposure to primary linguistic data and before and after which this is not possible (at least not that easily). It was Lenneberg's proposition that the end of this "critical period" is determined by a loss of brain plasticity – in particular by the completion of the lateralization of the language function in the left hemisphere. This lateralization claim was criticised by others, on the basis of evidence that lateralization of the language function occurs by 5 years of age or earlier.

Language Acquisition:

subconscious process

"Resulting in tacit knowledge of the language. Acquisition is "the process found in children under the ordinary circumstances of natural exposures to primary linguistic data." The capacity for language acquisition is at its height during the critical period (from approx. 2 years of age to puberty).

Language Learning:

conscious process

To be found most "typically in adults developing a language in the formal environment of the classroom". The capacity for language learning is claimed by some to arise only at puberty.

Bibliography:

Bhatia, Tej K. & Ritchie, William C. (1999), 'The Bilingual Child: Some Issues and Perspectives', in Ritchie & Bhatia (eds.), p. 569-643.