Dominance and language choice in an Indonesian-Italian bilingual child

One of the main issues in early bilingualism is to state whether the two languages a bilingual child is exposed to since birth are mixed in her mind and when differentiation takes place. A matter of debate is when the child chooses to use one language or the other and if mixed forms are due to 'confusion' or to an analytical language skill of the child.

This case study of an Indonesian-Italian bilingual child examines the occurrence of mixed forms and discusses the issues of language choice, code switching, language differentiation. In particular, it examines to which extent there is interference in the child's speech between these typologically different languages. Colloquial Indonesian is mostly isolating, partly agglutinative, while Italian is an inflected language.

The target child is Guglielmo, a child born to an Italian mother and an Indonesian father. He lives in an Indonesian-speaking environment, but his mother addresses him exclusively in Italian. He is fluent in Jakarta Indonesian and appears to comprehend Italian, although his production is still very limited. The Italian produced by Guglielmo is usually mixed with Indonesian elements. It is clear his dominant language is Indonesian, but Italian is definitely present in the child's mind as he reacts and responds appropriately when addressed by his mother.

In this study mixed Italian-Indonesian forms are examined in order to find out which categories are prone to mixing, and why and what is produced by the child and what not. The observation of atypical structures can help to understand the cognitive process in the speaker's mind and his analytical skills in the languages he is acquiring simultaneously. The occurrence of mixed forms at an early stage points to an early mixed language, where the speaker is unable to differentiate between the two languages. After the age of 2.5, it appears he becomes aware of the existence of the two languages, and begins to code switch according to the context. He fills the gaps in his competence in one language with equivalents acquired from the other, showing a tendency to mix elements (morphological, lexical, syntactic) from his dominant language (Indonesian) when speaking his non-dominant one (Italian).

The preliminary analysis of data aims to shed light on issues like language choice by bilingual children, language differentiation, and language dominance. A few examples listed below highlight different elements mixed by the child[i]. Examples 1-2 demonstrate that at the beginning, Guglielmo did not alter his language when addressing his Italian mother or Indonesians. With all interlocutors he used Indonesian with a few Italian elements. Examples 3-9 show that language differentiation has slowly taken place and mixed forms are mostly recorded in the Italian context where the child competence is lower and the input weaker. He says to his mother while giving her back the milk bottle:

1. *Mimik* **latte   no, Mamma**.   Guglielmo (2.1)
   Drink   milk-M.S   NEG Mommy
'I don't want to drink milk, Mom'
Here Italian and Indonesian lexical items coexist in the same utterance linked by negation in Italian.

2. *ini* **palla-palla**   (Guglielmo 2.1)
   this RED-ball
'These are balls'.

Pointing at a big vase containing dozens of balls, Guglielmo uses an Italian word reduplicated through a process typical of Indonesian to express an action characterized by multiciplity and variety.

3. *Spirit* **corre-corre**   (Guglielmo 2.8)
    Spirit RED-run
    'Spirit is running all over the place'
(commenting on the movie "Spirit" together with his Mother).

In the example 3. above, the Italian verb is reduplicated just like an Indonesian one to express an action happening in a continuous way and without any particular target.

4. **Questa   la   casa**   *siapa*?   (Guglielmo 2.9)
    This-F.S DEF-F.S house-F.S who
    'Whose house is this?'
where the word order in the sentence follows the Indonesian syntax.

5. **Guarda,   piccolo***nya*   *banyak*, **grande***nya*   *mana*?   (Guglielmo 2.9)
    Look-IMP.2SG small-M.S-NYA many   big-M.S-NYA where
    'Look, the small ones are many, where are the big ones?

Commenting with an Italian friend some color pencils, Guglielmo attaches the form –*nya* to Italian adjectives to express definite objects.

In the following example (6) Guglielmo's mother is asking him to get a book in another room and Guglielmo answers:

6. **con   Mamma** *aja*   (Guglielmo 2.10)
    with Mommy just
    'just you (take it)'

The Indonesian preposition *sama* 'with' functions as agent marker too in passive sentences. Guglielmo is unaware that in Italian **con** 'with' only functions as a preposition.

Interesting features are recorded in the verbs. Though Guglielmo has not yet learnt to conjugate verbs –he repeats the verb as expressed in the question- he has very clear its aspectual characteristics. Aspectual awareness is demonstrated in the following examples 7, 8, 9:

7. **Mamma, Guglielmo** *sudah* **fare   pipi**.   (Guglielmo 2.6)
    Mommy Guglielmo   PFCT do-INF pee-F.S
    Mommy, I peed.
(coming back from the bathroom).

If asked by his mother whether he has finished bathing he replies with:

8. *Sudah* **finito,   Ma**.   (Guglielmo 2.6)
     PFCT finished Mom
     'I've finished Mom'

Probably Guglielmo is not aware of the aspectual connotation of the verb 'finito' and needs to attach the Indonesian aspect marker of completed action 'sudah'.

The same is for the use of the future marker 'mau' that in Indonesian also means 'want'. In example 9, Guglielmo is not aware that in Italian the future aspect marker is expressed through a particular morpheme and thinks that the modal verb *voglio* 'want' also functions as a future aspect marker. In the car that suddenly stopped, the child says:

9. **Mamma,** *vuoi*   **caduto**.   (Guglielmo 2.10)
    Mommy want-PRES-2SG fallen-M.S
    'Mommy, I was about to fall down'.