

PROMOTING BILINGUALISM RESEARCH IN HONG KONG AND EAST ASIA:  
THE CHILDHOOD BILINGUALISM RESEARCH CENTRE\*

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The Childhood Bilingualism Research Centre (CBRC) 儿童双语研究中心 was established in 2008 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) to support the development of research in bilingualism and language acquisition. CBRC was launched with an inaugural international Conference on Bilingual Acquisition in Early Childhood in December 2008. It is the first Centre of its kind in Asia dedicated to the study of childhood bilingualism and multilingualism in diverse environments and communities, with a focus on the development of Cantonese, Mandarin and English. The Centre has been supported by the Focused Investment Scheme from CUHK and research grants from the Hong Kong Research Grants Council.



The Centre's mission is to achieve excellence in research in childhood bilingualism and multilingualism. It aims to serve children and parents in Hong Kong and the region by studying childhood bilingualism and propagating its positive outcomes. In documenting the development of bilingualism in bilingual children from its inception to maturity and demonstrating their achievements in attaining bilingual competence in childhood, we hope to raise the public's awareness of Hong Kong children's development of biliteracy and trilingualism. In the context of the Hong Kong and regional community, we promote the bilingual policy of 两文三语 "two written languages and three spoken codes". "Two written languages" refers to written Chinese 中文 and English 英文, while "three spoken codes" comprises spoken Cantonese 广东话, Putonghua 普通话 and spoken English 英语. CBRC takes the nurturing of bilingual and multilingual competence and awareness in children as central to our mission and vision. We also study and support revitalization of minority and heritage languages in the context of bilingual and multilingual education. Projects based at CBRC include corpus-based studies, experimental psycholinguistics, Cantonese and other Chinese languages and projects involving interdisciplinary collaboration.

#### AWARDS

Our most significant output to date is the monograph *The Bilingual Child: Early Development and Language Contact*, by Virginia Yip and Stephen Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2007) which received the Research Excellence Award (2006-2007) from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Leonard Bloomfield Book Award (2009) from the Linguistic Society of America. The Bloomfield Award recognizes the recently published book "which makes the most outstanding contribution to the development of our understanding of language and linguistics". The award honors Leonard Bloomfield, the dominant figure in American linguistics in the 1930s through the 1950s and the major impetus behind the founding of the Linguistic Society, of which he was President in 1935. The award consists of a portrait of Bloomfield which now graces CBRC, the original portrait being in the Linguistics Department at Yale University. The book has been reviewed in journals including *Journal of Child Language*, *Linguistics*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* and *Language Sciences*.

#### CORPUS-BASED STUDIES

Longitudinal corpora are constructed to document the development of two or more languages in children over an extended period of time. These corpora allow for the investigation of bilingual and trilingual children's developmental patterns in

lexicon, syntax and phonology, including tone and speech rhythm in Hong Kong children's Cantonese and English.

#### EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

Psycholinguistic experiments are designed to test children's comprehension and production of words and structures in Cantonese, English and Mandarin. Standardized assessment tools are used to assess Hong Kong children's English (receptive vocabulary, expressive vocabulary, grammar and articulation).



#### CANTONESE AND OTHER CHINESE LANGUAGES

Research and publications on Cantonese and comparative Chinese Grammar include a second edition of Matthews and Yip's *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar*, first published by Routledge in 1994. In response to requests from many users, the second edition incorporates Cantonese characters for example sentences. This will enhance readability for those with reading knowledge of Chinese, including speakers of Japanese and Korean: indeed, the Japanese edition of this book by Chishima and Kataoka (2000) which includes Chinese characters has been very helpful in preparing the revised edition.

It also provides a learning opportunity for adventurous learners, as well of speakers of other varieties of Chinese, to develop a reading knowledge of Cantonese. Many of the example sentences are updated reflecting current usage including *ciu4jyu5* 潮语 'trendy language'. A multimedia website will be available to provide supplementary materials and references. The second edition also reflects changes in our understanding of Cantonese grammar, incorporating insights from language typology, language processing

and language acquisition. The authors' projects and publications in recent years have taken complementary perspectives on the analysis of Cantonese grammar. Our work on Cantonese-English bilingual acquisition (Yip and Matthews 2007a, 2007b, 2010), for example, has led us to rethink the description of relative clauses and noun-modifying clauses. Our studies on sentence processing have shed new light on topicalization (Matthews and Yeung 2001) and serial verbs (Francis and Matthews 2006). By combining these approaches, we aim to achieve convergence of perspectives on our conceptualization and analysis of Cantonese grammar.

#### INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

A new instrument, the Mandarin Receptive Vocabulary Test to assess Hong Kong children's Mandarin is under development in collaboration with Institute of Human Communicative Research, Division of Speech Therapy, Faculty of Medicine, CUHK.

Another project aims to develop an e-learning platform for Chinese learners of English, in collaboration with Human-Computer Communications Laboratory, Department of Systems Engineering & Engineering Management, Faculty of Engineering, CUHK, and Independent Learning Centre, CUHK.

#### CBRC'S LOGO

The Centre's aims and aspirations are represented in its Logo containing three symbolic elements: a vine leaf, grapes embedding the Centre abbreviation *CBRC*, and rainbow colours represented in the leaf and grapes. The vine represents growth and development in childhood. It is during early childhood, the most extraordinary period in one's lifetime that the bilingual child develops the knowledge of multiple languages. The grapes represent the fruition and end point of development when the child attains competence in multiple languages. As educators and researchers, we all labour in the vineyard of education and research laboratories, we also hope that our research will bear fruit in its season.



The three colours, cerulean 蔚藍 for Cantonese, magenta 品紅 for Mandarin and emerald 翠綠 for English represent three different languages in contact, giving rise to a spectrum of combinations of derived colours. The three languages in the Hong Kong speech community refer to Cantonese, Putonghua and English which are

designated as official languages according to the HKSAR's bilingual policy of *liang wen san yu* 兩文三語 "two written languages and three spoken codes". While acknowledging the importance of English as an international language, we are also committed to the promotion of Chinese language and culture, and dedicated to the preservation and development of indigenous language and culture as an invaluable part of our rich bilingual and bicultural heritage in the local community.

The colours of the rainbow also suggest diversity in theoretical approaches, empirical data and methodology. We believe that each theoretical approach has its own strengths. We aim to combine insights from language acquisition, typology, processing and developmental psycholinguistics in our research. Our centre encompasses expertise in these areas which have the potential to complement and synergize each other in illuminating complex phenomena in childhood bilingualism. We also embrace the diversity of languages and language pairs: childhood bilingualism will be better understood when investigated against a rich background of linguistic diversity, using a range of methodological approaches including corpus-based and experimental techniques.

#### DISTINGUISHED SPEAKERS LECTURE SERIES

A Workshop on Bilingualism and Language Acquisition was held at CUHK in March 2010 to launch the Distinguished Speakers Lecture Series, co-organized with the State Key Laboratory of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at HKU and the Global Parent Child Resource Center at Braemar Hill Nursery School. Two internationally renowned scholars, Professors Ellen Bialystok (York University, Canada) and Maria Polinsky (Harvard University, USA) gave inaugural speeches. The Workshop aimed to promote integration of research in the fields of bilingualism and language acquisition, raising the public's awareness of bilingualism and bringing the best of state-of-the-art research from the international community to benefit researchers and practitioners in Hong Kong and the region. It offers a platform for presentation and exchange of recent findings on children's acquisition of Cantonese, Mandarin and English, bringing together researchers and educators representing the fields of linguistics, cognitive neuroscience, psychology, speech therapy, engineering and language education. We hope to forge dialogue and synergy between researchers who share similar interests in bilingual acquisition, stimulating research with an interdisciplinary perspective.



The March 2010 workshop also saw the launch of longitudinal corpus data for two new bilingual children, Kasen and Darren, making a total of nine children in the Hong Kong Bilingual Child Language Corpus. Unlike the previous bilingual children from one parent-one language families investigated by our research team, the two new children come from Hong Kong families where the parents are both native speakers of Cantonese and second language speakers of English, and both parents alternate between the two languages in addressing the child. These children are representative of a new generation of bilingual children in Hong Kong. The children were video-taped regularly over a period of 2 years covering the age range from 1;07 to 4;00. Two research assistants were involved in each recording session, with one responsible for speaking each language on a regular basis. Spontaneous speech data were recorded at the child's home where the routines included activities such as playing with toys and telling stories. The interactions consisted of conversations between the child and the investigator and whichever adult caregiver was present. The resulting corpus data were transcribed in a standard format, digitized and linked with video files. On this initial release, there is a total of 40 files in the Kasen corpus and 55 files in the Darren corpus. Each file consists of approximately 30 minutes of interaction in Cantonese or English, with some code-mixed utterances. According to Professor Brian MacWhinney, Director of CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System), Carnegie Mellon University, the Hong Kong Bilingual Child Language Corpus was at the time of writing the most complete and state-of-the-art in the field of childhood bilingualism, as well as the largest multimedia bilingual corpora in any language. The creation of multimedia corpus

and experimental data that are audio- and video-linked will continue to be a prominent feature of our work.

Among CBRC's ongoing projects is a new book on bilingual development for the Cambridge University Press series Key Topics in the Study of Child Language (Yip and Matthews, forthcoming). This book introduces students and researchers from diverse fields to the theoretical issues in bilingual acquisition and a rich description of facts of bilingual acquisition. The book will include data from Chinese and East Asian languages which have increasingly become the focus of intense interest and investigation in bilingualism and child language acquisition.

CBRC also produces multimedia materials such as interviews with eminent scholars:

- Professor Brian MacWhinney, Director of the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES), Carnegie Mellon University, on the evolution and milestones of CHILDES and construction of bilingual corpora;
- Professor Samuel Cheung Hung-Nin 张洪年教授, Chinese University of Hong Kong, on Cantonese grammar and biliteracy and trilingualism in Hong Kong;
- Professor William Wang Shi-Yuan 王士元教授, Chinese University of Hong Kong, on the origin and development of the Journal of Chinese Linguistics and Linguistics as an interdisciplinary field.

The Centre welcomes visitors and potential research collaborators. We especially welcome opportunities for collaboration with international researchers from interdisciplinary fields around the world who share our interests.

#### NOTES

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