

# BULLETIN

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## Language Study Is a Family Affair

**W**hen Stephen Matthews and Virginia Yip started a family, they produced more than a child. A baby in the house provided the perfect starting point for these linguists to research the development of bilingualism in children.

Timmy, now aged 12, was followed by sisters Sophie, 9, and Alicia, 5. Together with four offspring of other academics, they have been extensively videotaped interacting with Chinese- and English-speaking researchers and had their utterances transcribed and analysed for insights into how children become bilingual.

The result is the world's largest video-linked database on the subject, which has been posted on the website of the Language Data Exchange System of Carnegie Mellon University in the United States. Matthews and Yip are also writing a book, *The Bilingual Child: Early Development and Language Contact*, to be published by Cambridge University Press.

Their study is the first to pair English and Chinese, as most other research has paired two European languages. The children all had a native English-speaking parent and a native Cantonese-speaking parent.

Matthews, Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Linguistics, and Yip, a professor of linguistics at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, found children learned the languages at different paces and there was a lot of interaction between each language.

The children tended to master Cantonese first, reflecting the extended family structures in Hong Kong where they have frequent contact with their Cantonese-speaking relatives. But just because one language was dominant did not rule out the development of bilingualism.

"One subject, Janet, was very fluent in Cantonese from age two and a half, but only produced odd words in English. Suddenly at age three, her English exploded into full sentences," Matthews said.

"It's all latent, it's all there," said Yip. "I'm sure she already understood a lot of English before she started speaking it. We call this a long silent period. It happens in second-language acquisition by adults, too."

Matthews and Yip also found the grammar of one language influenced the other. Some subjects in the study would use Cantonese grammar in English, for example, asking a question with the form 'this is what' not 'what is this'. Or the other way around, using English grammar in Cantonese and saying 'give her chocolate' rather than the correct form, 'give chocolate her'.

"You don't see these structures in monolingual children at that age," Matthews said.

Changes at home had an influence on language usage. When English-speaking relatives were visiting, children tended to speak more English. Some children also had a natural preference for speaking one language, or would object when their parents switched to their non-native language.

Yip said they hoped their findings could provide guidance for parents who want to raise bilingual children. Their main advice was to have a lot of family support, accept that it may take a little longer to master two languages so there will be some delays in speaking, and provide a good balance of input from both languages. Even monolingual parents could encourage bilingualism by providing their children with a social network that connects them to children who speak other languages, she said.

The more typical Hong Kong family, where both parents are native Cantonese speakers but also speak English, is next in their sights. Matthews and Yip plan to study families where one parent chooses to speak English to the child, to track how bilingualism develops in such circumstances.

