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What Bilingual Education Has Taught the Experimental Psychologist: A Capsule Account in Honor of Joshua A. Fishman

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1. Introduction

In the fall of 1979, shortly after receiving my doctorate in Experimental Psychology from the hallowed halls of William James Hall at Harvard (home of B.F. Skinner, S.S. Stevens, and others trying to make physics out of psychology), I found myself with a job in the Psychology Department at Yale University wishing to build on the research trajectory set by my dissertation on the burning issue of word order and relative clause processing in Japanese children. Now a little over a decade later, I frequently find myself in the heart of the policy debate over bilingual education in the United States. How did I go wrong/right? What have I learned?

This piece is admittedly narcissistic, and I speak as a novice to the field of bilingual education when compared to the other contributors to this volume, many of whom were publishing on the issue before I had ever heard of the term. My contribution concerns my transformation into an academic whose burning question has become something having to do with the real world.

I felt that a brief account such as this might be fitting as a tribute to Joshua Fishman because of his record as an intellectual omnivore, a model to which I aspire. Further, I wished to document the aspects of research and researcher development that have little to do with the idealized textbook model

of research (someone who, on the basis of theory and previous research, sets up hypotheses tested by critical studies,which lead to progressive approximations of truth through the elimination of alternative hypotheses). If you will, that idealized researcher is analogous to Chomskyan competence, and this chapter is about performance. In the course of this account, I also wish to capture a bit of history of the interaction between research and politics that have marred the landscape of bilingual education. Joshua Fishman has, of course, been central in the formation of this landscape throughout.

2. Science

The greatest legacy of the psycholinguistics movement of the 1960s was in impressing the value of formal description in advancing our knowledge about human behavior. Undoubtedly, we spent a lot of time finding out what we were not, e.g. that we do not follow the operations of such and such a version of Chomsky's transformational grammar when we process sentences. But at least this approach took us out of a purely inductive process towards our language behavior, an approach whose epistemological status was strongly refuted by Chomsky.

In 1979, as I was emerging out of the cocoon having shown that a few esoteric linguistic theories were inapplicable to children acquiring Japanese syntactic structures, a finding that was noted by at least ten individuals (including my mother, but excluding my wife), I wanted to keep doing this kind of mapping between formal theory and behavior until my TIAA-CREF retirement fund would reach maturity.

Several factors intervened in my continued progress. First, formal linguistics was becoming increasingly abstract and required an inordinate amount of time to keep up with. I had been warned by my mentor (who tolerated the focus of my dissertation). The awful truth about chasing those purple mimeo manuscripts was that formal linguists can disassemble theories overnight, far more quickly than experimental psychologists trying to test these theories can construct an experiment. In any event, like most psycholinguists, at about Chomsky's Government and Binding theory, I lost motivation to keep reading the formal stuff.

A second major factor had to do with the nature of the students at Yale's psychology department. My predecessor there was Katherine Nelson, a developmental psychologist specializing in language but who never really had bought into what formal linguistics had to offer. So the graduate students I found waiting for me at Yale were primarily those who saw language development from a traditional cognitive developmental perspective. Although several bright undergraduates found this esoterica interesting (I still have a few of those once in a while), most graduate students were too wise to get into something that was seen as a strange preoccupation centered around Cambridge, Massachusetts, and rapidly diminishing in value as one moved away (with notable oases). In any event, it became quickly evident that force-feeding my papers or even those by Steve Pinker would win few converts (see Pinker 1979 for an example of his work on learnability theory).

3. Money

Another influential force was the fundamental fact of life in a university. Without funding, you are nobody. About a month after my arrival at Yale, my senior colleague Bill Kessen plopped on my desk a grant application packet for the National Science Foundation's Applied Behavioral Sciences Program. Not being totally stupid, I got the message, and I decided to fill it out. The start-up funds of $5000 that I received from Yale was unlikely to pay my bills for long, and with my salary, I was hardly in a position to pay for my own xeroxing and stamps.

4. People

One of my graduate students, Rafael Díaz, introduced me to Aida Comulada, who was the Director of the Bilingual Education Program in the New Haven Public Schools. When they had met at a prior social event, Aida suggested to Rafael that he do some research with the Bilingual Education Program. Aida is an infinitely charming person who clearly saw the significance of encouraging research on bilingual education, and she worked on us to establish a "town-gown" relationship. So Rafael and I decided that we shape a proposal around the Bilingual Program. Rafael made it abundantly clear that he had no interest in pursuing esoteric questions having to do with formal linguistic universals, so we compromised and decided to extend the work on bilingualism

and cognitive flexibility, a tradition whose modern beginnings rest with Peal and Lambert (1962). We were funded almost immediately, and we were happy as we merrily went about doing our business of basic science, in the context of a bilingual education program.

5. Politics

We were embarassingly naive about the nature of bilingual education in the United States. Indeed, we were first somewhat surprised to hear that not all children in bilingual programs are bilingual, and indeed, that the goal of the program was to put them in English-only classes. I started reading on the topic, and perhaps the single most useful document to get me grounded was the four-volume series put out by the Center for Applied Linguistics (1977). The volume on the social science perspective by Joshua Fishman painted a profoundly rich document that to this day continues to yield new insights on each re-reading. As we started drawing our conclusions from our research about the positive effects of bilingualism on cognitive ability, we knew that this would have some relevance to bilingual education, but we were not sure quite what.

To reveal how naive I was about the political swirls that buffeted (and continue to buffet) bilingual education, in June of 1981, I received a call from a certain individual from NIE asking me if I would be interested in writing a commissioned paper on the status of bilingual education. Not knowing what I was getting involved in, I innocently replied that maybe I could talk Rafael into doing it with me, since we might learn something about it. Word evidently got around knowledgeable individuals in Washington that I might be doing this. Probably the most merciful phone call of my life came from Tracy Gray at the Center for Applied Linguistics, who knew the exact political motive that lay behind this commission and warned me in no unexplicit terms to stay out. "Now tell me", I vividly recall being asked, "do you know of the Baker/de Kanter document?" To which I innocently replied, "The who document?"

This document, of course, became a famous piece in the bilingual education controversy, having started as an internal memo within the Office of Planning, Budget and Evaluation (OPBE) in the Department of Education. It "reviewed" evaluation studies of bilingual education and concluded that these programs were not effective. There is now wide agreement on the technical

limitations of the study (see Willig 1985), and it certainly would not be published in any serious peer-reviewed journal. Indeed, the paper never really made it into print except in the form of a self-serving book edited by the authors of the report (Baker and de Kanter 1983). However, it did fit the anti-bilingual education political agenda of the changing political landscape and the chorus of some high-level (and not-so-high-level) bureaucrats, and even made the rounds in Congress as some members moved to limit Title VII legislation.

What I had been asked to do, evidently by some people in the National Institute of Education and the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA) who were still politically sympathetic to bilingual education and foresaw the destructive potential of the document, was to offer an antidote document. Obviously, I was not qualified to do this; but even more obviously, such things do not matter in the policy circles where institutional credibility can be more important than substance.

6. Money, Again

As funds from the NSF grant dried up in the end of 1981 (as did the program from which we received funding), I turned to the NIE to help continue our work, which was going well. We had established a reliable way of measuring the relationship between degree of bilingualism and cognitive abilities, and had shown this to be a positive one. We were now set to continue observations over time to look for cause-effect relations.

The NIE was by this time already scaling down, and did not have much funds available. However, they were part of the "Part C Committee" (described later) together with the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA) and other representatives within the Department of Education (including the Office of Planning, Budget and Evaluation, OPBE) which allocated the research funds under Title VII. And since my study was conducted in the context of a bilingual education program, I was funded for two more years under this program.

The Part C Committee needs to be investigated in greater detail by a future student of the politics of bilingual education. "Part C" refers to Section C of the bilingual education legislation where Congress mandates research activities, including evaluation. Although funds under this section are to be ad-

ministered by OBEMLA, evidently a variety of conditions led to the establishment of a committee more broadly representative of the department to coordinate research initiatives. As time went along, most certainly by the time my study got funded by Part C, OBEMLA had lost much of the control over the allocation of resources and a number of studies favored by OPBE staff were commissioned (including the study comparing the relative effectiveness of structured immersion and bilingual education programs, still not officially released and entangled in a web of politics thinly disguised as technical problems).

7. Science, Again

We continued to chip away at the problem of bilingualism and cognitive ability. Rafael developed and tested hypotheses about the mechanisms by which bilingualism might lead to improved performance on our measures. I analyzed the longitudinal data and started putting the study in its proper historical and sociolinguistic context.

Throughout this work, I considered it important to invest a good deal of time getting to know the classrooms and came to know many of the teachers quite well. I quickly discovered the extra-linguistic factors that affect the development of children in the programs, including the high rate of mobility (this showed up, for example, in a high rate of sample attrition in the longitudinal study), and the differences in these rates and other indicators of livelihood across the different schools and parts of the city. And I became concerned with the tremendous amount of misunderstanding about bilingual education carried in popular myths and fueled by politicians and the media.

There was a familiar ring to these negative comments about bilingual education. They echoed what I was reading in my explorations into the archival materials on bilingualism and intelligence, where bilingualism was blamed for everything from bad attitude to mental retardation. Indeed, this earlier literature, which was concerned with the problem of bilingualism in "folk bilinguals", stood in stark contrast to the positive assessments made about "elite bilinguals", a contrast that Joshua Fishman has repeatedly emphasized. Thus, the distinction between "good" and "bad" versions of bilingualism and the prejudices that surround this distinction came to be an important theme in my work. I was proud to have found support for the positive effects of bilingualism, not just for its pure scientific value, but for the fact that it demonstrated a parallelism between "good" and "bad" bilinguals.

8. Politics, Again

In August, 1985, I organized a panel with graduate student Bernardo Ferdman for the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA) in Los Angeles on bilingualism. The panel included Donald Taylor, Alexander Guiora, and Robert Gardner. Being in Los Angeles, the APA organizers thought there would be press interest in bilingualism, so they organized a press conference to follow our session.

The panel itself was quite dry, talking about technical aspects of bilingualism and its relationship with cognitive and social variables. It included really dry discussion that only social scientists would have a taste for, such as the question of levels of analysis, and the use of words like "micro versus macro". Indeed, as I recall it, the size of the panel threatened to exceed the number of people in attendance. The press conference following was quite a bit more lively.

We were asked to do what academics more frequently should be asked to do, i.e to summarize our papers in a minute or two. And then we were bombarded by questions about bilingual education. We answered them, saying we felt that bilingual education is a good thing and so forth. Curiously, though, none of our papers was really about bilingual education. Mine was about the closest, having been conducted in the context of a bilingual education program, but never in my wildest dream did I consider it to be a study on the effectiveness of bilingual education. But that's what they all wanted to know about.

Quite a bit of press was generated from this meeting. *The New York Times* ran a headline, "Bilingual pupils said to have edge", and plenty followed suit, along with invitations for talk shows and debates, all having to do with the effectiveness of bilingual education. Another invitation came from Ricardo Martinez of the House Education Committee, who asked if I could come and brief Congressional staff on bilingual education. I told him that I could brief them on basic research on bilingualism. He said fine, I can brief them on bilingual education, and suggested that I come down on September 27th. We confirmed that date later on, and he told me that there was considerable interest in what I would have to say.

The reason why that date turned out to be an odd coincidence was that on the morning of September 26th, Secretary of Education William Bennett launched a well-orchestrated attack on bilingual education. He had most effectively homed in on an issue that would enable him to use his "bully pulpit" and get media attention. The press release circulated in advance of his speech claimed:

> Despite a Federal investment of $1.7 billion over 17 years (currently about $139 million annually), research has not shown transitional bilingual education to be more successful than other methods of instruction in helping non-English speaking children become proficient in English. Therefore, the Department of Education is proposing to give local school districts greater flexibility in choosing instructional methods they believe will be most effective for their limited English proficient students.

As the date approached, I started receiving all kinds of calls from individuals representing interest groups informing me of the importance of my session. Coming on the heels of Bennett, my briefing was seen as a response, something I was hardly equipped to do. "Uh-oh," I thought, "this time I'm really stuck! Tracy, where are you?" I empathized with Bambi in that famous and briefest of films, "Bambi Meets Godzilla".

What I did prepare under fear of total embarrassment was a statement about why evaluation research on bilingual education is seriously flawed and is easily swayed by political winds. That much I knew to be true, having read the history of the Baker/de Kanter debate, its predecessor the AIR report, and other evaluations. Instead, I suggested that it would be more credible to look at basic research on bilingualism to help guide policy, and I prepared a "fact sheet" about basic research on bilingualism. These facts would support the fundamental principles of bilingual education.

I still use these points in speaking to various groups about bilingual education, and reproduce them in modified form in Table 1. They are basic conclusions that have been around for some time, and need to be strengthened and tested as to their limits of generalization. Being very doubtful that evaluation research in bilingual education will ever emerge out of the stranglehold of political forces, it is my strong conviction more than ever that basic research on second language acquisition and the psycho/sociolinguistics of bilingualism must receive priority funding support.

Table 1
Research conclusions about bilingualism and bilingual education

- Double standards exist about bilingualism: good for some children, but not for others; expectations about speed of second language learning are different too.
- Evaluation of bilingual education programs is very political; often, it is not clear what is being compared with what – apples with oranges. We have to be very careful about interpreting program evaluations. Instead of looking only at evaluation research, we should be looking at what basic research has to say about bilingualism in children.
- Bilingualism is a good thing for children of all backgrounds – when bilingual children are compared with monolingual children on different kinds of skills, bilingual children are superior.
- To be "proficient", "to be fluent", "to know" a language means many different things: you can have good conversational skills, but that is different from being able to use it in other settings, such as in school. Bilingual children are often informally evaluated in their conversational skills, but not in how they can use English in school.
- The two languages of the bilingual child are interdependent – they do not compete for limited space and resources.
- The stronger the native language of the children, the more efficiently they will learn English.
- Knowledge and skills learned in one language transfer to the other language – they do not have to be re-learned.
- It is a myth that children are like linguistic sponges; they may take anywhere from 2-7 years, especially to master the academic uses of English.
- It is a myth that the younger children are, the faster they learn a second language.
- Bilingual program evaluations, although problematic, suggest that (1) bilingual programs are more effective than alternative programs, and (2) good bilingual classrooms have the same features as any good monolingual classroom.
- When we talk about bilingual education, we are entrapped by myths and labels; we should try not to get worked up about the labels of programs, because the issue becomes primarily political; we know from basic research that a good education in two languages is achievable, that it can have many benefits, and all we need to do is to build the commitment to establish programs that get us out of the imprisoning mentality that the two languages have to be in competition.

9. Science, Again and Again

The study of bilingualism from linguistic, psychological, and sociological perspectives holds an important place in science. Having taken a peek into the world of the politics of bilingual education, I am now even more firmly of the belief that the best role for the student of human mind, behavior and institutions is to continue strengthening the science. The best defense available against politically motivated attacks on the ideals of bilingual education is two-pronged. Obviously, fire must be met with fire, which is to say that advocacy and political activity is essential (I do this poorly, but fortunately there are many others who excel at this). But the other is to have a solid body of theory and research that is not part of special interest groups for particular educational policies. Researchers have their own political opinions that undoubtedly challenge their objectivity and the questions that they ask, but the results and interpretations can at least be questioned and challenged under a set of logic and methods that do not exist in the world of policy.

Besides strengthening my conviction on the need to advance basic knowledge, however, bilingual education has taught me that scientific knowledge can and should be integrated into real world problems without compromising their integrity. The artificial distinction between basic and applied research is a myth that may have served some noble causes, but I believe it is as much a phantom an ideal as is the idealization of progress in research (someone who, on the basis of theory and previous research, sets up hypotheses tested by critical studies, which lead to progressive approximations of truth through the elimination of alternative hypotheses). We researchers are human, and therefore we are opportunistic, serendipitous, greedy and playful; when we are lucky, circumstances combine into a rare configuration that is considered creative. All of us researchers in bilingualism must be thankful to Joshua Fishman for having created so many opportunities in which we can attempt to be academics and pragmatists at the same time.