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PREFACE: THE ACQUISITION OF CELTIC LANGUAGES

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Some problems of Celtic language acquisition

It has long been recognised in the field of second language teaching and learning that there is some kind of relationship between the process of first language acquisition and that of learning language as an older child or adult in a classroom or other structured environment. The precise nature of this relationship, however, is by no means clear. Differences between first and second language learning may be *internal* to the mind and brain, *external* in so far as the linguistic environments are usually different for each type of learning, or *interactive* to the degree that the individual brings different attitudes and motivations to the language learning process in different social settings. Then again, apparent differences between first and second (or plural) language learning may not really be that great: conventional wisdom and particular research traditions hold that children have a natural superiority in language learning, sometimes attributed to the biology of brain maturation, yet more recent work and counter-evidence urges us to be cautious and qualified in accepting such a view (see, for example, Scovel 1988, Singleton 1989, and Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). Either way, or perhaps just because the field is still full of unanswered questions, the relationship between first and second language acquisition poses a central problem for anyone who works with language learning.

The problem of language acquisition is particularly acute for the Celtic languages, since most children acquiring a Celtic language as a first language do so in a minority language environment in which bilingualism with the socially dominant language is an inevitability. The effect of this large-scale bilingualism is twofold. Obviously, it becomes difficult to find children whose linguistic environments are so monolingually Celtic that they represent the 'pure' unfolding of a Celtic language in the mind. It thus becomes difficult to know if a child's deviation from the adult language norm is attributable to developmental errors of the kind typical of children everywhere, or if cross-linguistic interference from another language is involved. Due to the diversity of language inputs and environments for children learning Celtic languages from birth, it also becomes difficult for applied specialists such as classroom teachers or speech and language therapists to establish linguistic norms in the acquisition process: 100 learners of a minority language in a bilingual context may well show more

diversity in their proficiency in the language than a comparable 100 monolingual learners of English or French in a stable majority situation.

Moreover, the effect of bilingualism in the acquisition process cannot be understood simply in terms of an effect on the language learner. A converse relationship is also important, i.e., the language itself may undergo change as it is learned by successive generations of bilingual speakers. In Ireland, for example, this effect is at least anecdotally reported up through the school years: Irish-medium schools may be the stronghold of maintaining the language, but they are also a rich breeding ground for code-switching, bilingual language influences, and other distinctive linguistic changes. In such cases, deviations from textbook norms may not represent developmental errors or active cross-linguistic interference, but a shift in community norms which grammar books are slow to reflect. The researcher investigating language acquisition for the Celtic languages is thus faced with a challenge, to understand not only the process itself, but to interpret it in the light of a changing social and linguistic environment.

A confluence of interests

Given the linguistic, social, and psycholinguistic dimensions to the problem of Celtic language acquisition, it is perhaps surprising that more research has not taken place in this area. One major project which was undertaken in the years from 1994 to 1998 was initiated by Janig Stephens of the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. This project, entitled 'Language Acquisition in Bilingual Pre-School Children in Brittany, Ireland, Scotland and Wales', was funded by the Commission of the European Union under funding for Lesser Used Languages of Europe. The project had four research centres (in Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and Brittany), each of which was charged with the responsibility for making cross-sectional and longitudinal tape recordings of children from 2 to 5 years of age. Some research papers have arisen from this enterprise in two volumes of working papers (*Teod/Teanga/Tafod* 1995, 1996). The research project also initiated an international colloquium on childhood bilingualism and the lesser used languages of Europe, which was held with the support of the Conseil Régional de Bretagne and the Conseil Général des Côtes-d'Armor in Plésidy, France in 1997. Papers from this conference, in French, English, and Spanish, were edited by Favereau (1999).

Working on another side of the Celtic languages, the Linguistics Department in University College Dublin organised the Third Celtic Linguistics Conference for May, 2000. This event was also an international one, which covered a wide range of linguistic problems. Given the

development of research in the acquisition of Celtic languages, it seemed only natural to try to bring together acquisition specialists and linguists at the same time. The conference organisers, Cathal Doherty and Máire Ní Chiosáin, enthusiastically incorporated an acquisition session into the original programme. The papers presented at this session form the basis of the current issue of the *Journal of Celtic Language Learning*. Further papers were also presented by Alison Henry of the University of Ulster on 'Language acquisition, language change and code-switching: acquiring Belfast Irish' and by Morag McNeil of Sabhal Mor Ostaig on the Isle of Skye on 'An exploratory look at acquiring competence in the concept of possession in Gàidhlig'.

Continuing the theme of broadening interests in the Celtic languages, it was then proposed to the editors of the *JCLL* that a North American readership well used to issues of second language learning might be interested in a collection of papers devoted to first language acquisition in Ireland and Wales. Muiris Ó Laoire and Nancy Stenson were most encouraging, and it has been my pleasure and privilege to work with them as 'guest editor' for this volume.

It is my belief that even the most hardened adult language specialist will find much of interest in this issue of the *JCLL*. The paper by *Borsley and Jones* (pp. 9-20) focuses on the acquisition of verb tense marking in Welsh. For adult Anglophone learners, the tense marking system of Welsh is different enough to present a learning challenge: it is instructive to see the way in which Borsley and Jones's sample of children slowly begins to develop finite clauses, alongside an extended period in which finite markers are still missing. Some related ground is touched on in the wide-ranging study by *Stephens and Richards* (pp. 35-51) of the language development of a Welsh-speaking child with a cochlear implant who was recorded between the ages of 7 and 9 years of age. Here too, we see the progress of some areas of development, most notably the determiner system, together with the phased growth of more complex systems. For *Goodluck, Guilfoyle, and Harrington* (pp. 21-33), looking at Irish, it is relative clauses which are of interest. The difference between *an buachaill a itheann úll* 'the boy that eats an apple' and *an carr a thiomáineann Neil* 'the car that Neil drives' is subtle on the surface, but vital for language learners, whether as mother tongue speakers or adult second language students; as the authors demonstrate, children can perform quite well in mastery of the relevant forms, but results can also lead to a deeper look for variation within the language itself.

Taking a somewhat different approach, which links grammar more closely to morphology and in some ways to phonology, *Gathercole*,

Thomas, and Laporte (pp. 53-87) take on the complex question of gender marking in Welsh. Any study of grammatical gender naturally invites an investigation of the relationship between 'natural' gender related to the gender of the referent, and grammatical gender as determined by the rules of the language. Arguably, the latter is more abstract and more difficult to learn, and Gathercole, Thomas, and Laporte test a variety of hypotheses which ultimately point towards the piecemeal acquisition of the gender system, balancing the conflicting demands of natural and grammatical gender as well as the different phonological systems of initial consonant mutation which help to mark gender distinctions. These results are clearly relevant to anyone who has worked with the complexities of gender marking and the initial consonant mutations for which the Celtic languages are so well known.

The current volume, which also updates the field with a review of Irish-language software packages, thus represents a confluence of interests among Celticists, first language acquisition specialists, second language teachers and learners, and others. This issue is something different for the JCLL, but it is hoped that it will constitute one further step towards the understanding of a broad range of problems in the Celtic languages and in language acquisition generally.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF FINITENESS IN EARLY WELSH

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This paper discusses the development of finiteness in early Welsh on the basis of a large corpus of natural speech from seven children, four in the Bangor area and three in the Aberystwyth area, recorded for approximately nine months between the ages of 19 and 27 months in 1993-4 and 1996. Overall the corpus shows a gradual emergence of finiteness. The earliest clausal utterances have no finite element. Later, finite sentences and especially sentences with forms of the copula *bod* appear. However, sentences with no finite element continue to occur after the appearance of the first finite sentences. It is likely that the changes in the observed data are as much a reflection of changes in the children's processing ability as of changes in their grammar.

Introduction

A major focus of research on the acquisition of syntax has been the development of finiteness. In this paper, we will discuss the development of finiteness in early Welsh on the basis of a large corpus of naturally-occurring speech from seven children acquiring Welsh as a first language, who were recorded for approximately nine months between the ages of 19 and 27 months. Four of the children were living in the Bangor area and three in the Aberystwyth area. One of the Bangor children was recorded in 1993-4. All the other children were recorded in 1996 as part of an ESRC-financed project (grant number R/000/23/6420). We will show that the earliest clausal utterances lack finite elements and that the use of such elements develops gradually, with utterances that lack finite elements persisting after the first finite elements appear. We will also consider the implications of the data in a preliminary way.

The basic data

The corpus that we are drawing on here consists of 168 recordings as follows. As can be seen, there are just 11 recordings for one of the children, but for the other six there are 24-29 recordings. For these children, the