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Parents' Perceptions of Children's Bi-/Multilingualism

Abstract

Nowadays, many children all over the world are raised with more than one native language. The aim of the present study was to investigate how parents/caregivers evaluate the language competences of children growing up with two or more languages from birth or from very early in life. The results indicate that the language skills of young bi-/multilinguals are generally perceived to be comparable to those of their monolingual peers, though they are typically asymmetrical. Cross-linguistic influence is a common phenomenon which does not raise parents' concern. The outcomes also point to certain factors which may shape children's language competences.

Keywords: early bilingualism and multilingualism, native language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence

The number of transnational and multilingual families is rising continuously in many parts of the world (Li & Hua, 2015). Consequently, more and more children are growing up in contact with more than one native language (L1) from birth or from an early age. Nowadays, additive bi-/multilingualism is often considered an advantageous situation which enriches the linguistic repertoire of a child (e.g., De Houwer, 2005; Genesee & Nicoladis, 2009; Legacy et al., 2018; Meisel, 1990; see the next section). Nevertheless, some scholars indicate bi-/multilingual children's delay in their language development (e.g., Genesee & Nicoladis, 2009; Gósy, 2007; Hoff et al., 2012; Oller et al., 2007; Ordóñez, 2004; see the next section). The present study aims to gain further insight

into this issue by investigating parents' opinions on the language competences of children raised with more than one L1.

Early Bi-/Multilingualism

Early bilingualism (bilingual first language acquisition) results from an early contact with two native languages (or dialects). Similarly, early multilingualism (multilingual first language acquisition) means that three or more mother tongues (or dialects) develop in early childhood (Chłopek, 2016, pp. 51–52). Scholars are not unanimous as to when precisely contact with each language should begin for a child to be considered an early (and not late) bi-/multilingual (Chłopek, 2016, pp. 52). In the present paper, we adopt a neurolinguistic perspective on bi-/multilingualism based on the distinction between implicit linguistic competence which is subserved by procedural memory and explicit metalinguistic knowledge which is subserved by declarative memory (Paradis, 2004, 2009; Ullman, 2001). Procedural memory is a subconscious type of memory, which is available from birth, but already around the age of five begins to gradually lose its plasticity. Native languages develop predominantly by means of this memory. The period from around the age of two to around the age of five is extremely important, since this is when procedural/implicit language competences must develop. Declarative memory, conversely, which is responsible for conscious learning processes, starts to develop around the age of two, but it is not until a child's seventh birthday that it functions relatively well. After this age it keeps developing, partly in response to school instruction in the native language, growing literacy skills, and rising metalinguistic awareness (Paradis, 2004, 2009). After puberty, declarative memory is enhanced and grows until early adulthood, while procedural memory becomes less available, even though performance in procedural memory may increase with practice (Ullman, 2001). Since mother tongues are acquired mainly by means of procedural memory, we assume that early bi-/multilinguals are people who have reached a fairly communicative proficiency level in two or more languages by the age of five. Any languages learned later in life are non-native languages.

Several research studies indicate that, as Meisel (1990, p. 17) puts it, “bilingual first language acquisition does not differ in substantial ways from monolingual development.” It has been claimed that children acquiring one L1 and those acquiring two L1s go through the same developmental stages and at a similar speed (e.g., De Houwer, 2005; Genesee & Nicoladis, 2009; Legacy et al., 2018). Researchers also believe that in the case of multilingual children,

stages of language development are in agreement with monolingual norms (Barnes, 2006; Gatto, 2004; Navracscics, 1998).

It has also been postulated that bi-/multilinguals are characterised by high levels of metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness comprises sensitivity to language as a system of signs, the ability to concentrate on linguistic forms independently of their meanings and to analyse and manipulate them consciously, as well as the capacity to notice cross-linguistic similarities (Jessner, 2006, p. 42), and is believed to positively affect language development (D'Angelo & Sorace, 2022; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Jessner, 2006; Thomas, 1988). Studies conducted with children show young bilinguals' advantage over young monolinguals as regards metalinguistic awareness (Marinova-Todd, Zhao, & Bernhardt, 2010; Vásquez Carranza, 2009), as well as exceptionally high metalinguistic skills of young multilinguals (Hoffmann & Stavans, 2007; Navracscics, 1998). Metapragmatic awareness, in turn, manifests itself as sensitivity to one's interlocutors (their communicative preferences, needs, and characteristics) and the situational context in which communication takes place, as well as the ability to collaborate with others in order to achieve communicative success (Tomasello, 1999; Verschueren, 2000). High metapragmatic awareness may translate into high effectiveness of language acquisition (Safont Jordà, 2003). Researchers particularly emphasise young bi-/multilinguals' awareness of the fact that different people should be addressed in different languages (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2009; Montanari, 2009; Navracscics, 1998).

Nevertheless, children who grow up with more than one language may initially develop their language competences more slowly in comparison with their monolingual peers. In the first years of life, the mental lexicon of a bi-/multilingual child in each of their languages¹ is often narrower than that of a monolingual child of the same age (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2009; Hoff et al., 2012; Oller et al., 2007), and also other competences, such as grammar (Hoff et al., 2012), narrative skills (Ordóñez, 2004), or phonological processing (Gósy, 2007) may develop more slowly. This is a natural consequence of the fact that, compared to a monolingual child, a child raised bi-/multilingually uses each of their languages to a lesser extent—for fewer waking hours, in fewer communicative situations, and for fewer purposes (De Houwer, 2009; Grosjean, 1989; Hoff et al., 2012).

A common aspect of bi-/multilingualism is cross-linguistic influence (CLI), which is a psycholinguistic phenomenon consisting in one language present in the bi-/multilingual mind being affected by another one (Grosjean, 1989; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; van Dijk et al., 2022) and resulting from constant co-activation of language systems stored in the brain (Thierry & Wu, 2007). CLI

¹ Nevertheless, De Houwer (2022, p. 5) believes that normally developing, healthy bilingual children “learn to understand and speak at least one language to levels similar to monolingual peers at similar ages.”

leads to different kinds of language mixing, such as, for example, interlingual transfer (i.e., a “takeover” of the grammatical, phonetic, semantic etc. properties of a non-target language for the purposes of target language production), code switching (i.e., the use of non-target lexical items, phrases, or clauses), or borrowing (i.e., the adaptation of non-target lexical items in accordance with target language principles) (Chłopek, 2016, pp. 34–35; De Angelis, 2007; Sharwood Smith & Kellerman, 1986, p. 1).² CLI may, at times, hamper communication, particularly with monolinguals; however, with sufficient exposure to each language, it disappears over time (Döpke, 1998; Müller & Hulk, 2001); moreover, cross-language communicative practices such as translanguaging are even believed to speed up the language learning process (Li, 2018).

The Present Study

Aim of the Study and Research Questions

The present study aimed to gain more insight into the language abilities of young bi-/multilinguals, based on parents/caregivers’ perceptions of them. Thus, the following research questions were addressed: (1) How do parents/caregivers evaluate the language competences of children raised in early bi-/multilingualism? (2) How do they perceive cross-linguistic influence in their children’s speech? It was expected that the outcomes would depend on the children’s age, a younger age predicting lower linguistic competences in comparison with monolingual children, as well as more intensive CLI. As mentioned above, even though young bi-/multilinguals’ linguistic abilities are believed to be comparable to those of their monolingual peers, some language areas (such as vocabulary) may be less well-developed (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2009; Gósy, 2007; Hoff et al., 2012; Oller et al., 2007; Ordóñez, 2004). Apart from the main goal of finding answers to the research questions, it was hoped that the study would provide additional information about young bi-/multilinguals’ characteristics, for example, their metalinguistic awareness, as well as some external factors influencing their language competences, such as the attitudes of the environment towards bi-/multilingualism.

²It must be noted that the terminology used in this paper is by no means applied universally in different psycholinguistic publications.

Method and Procedure

Data was collected by means of a questionnaire directed at parents and caregivers of bi-/multilingual children. On the one hand, a questionnaire study may be considered as biased by subjectivity, since parents may tend to evaluate their own children too favourably. On the other hand, such a study provides researchers with information based on data gathered in natural communicative settings by people who have permanent and intimate contact with their children and thus are able to recognise their verbal and nonverbal intentions much better than a researcher who usually concentrates on selected aspects of language in an artificial setting of a research study. For this reason, questionnaire studies may be treated as complementary to those conducted in controlled conditions.

The questionnaire consisted of closed- and open-ended questions. These aimed at obtaining information about the children's language biography and their environment (five questions), their language competences (four questions), and any other aspects of their language development (three questions and a space for further comments). The participants were asked to evaluate the receptive and productive competences in their children's languages by comparing them with those of monolingual children of the same age they had contact with. In particular, they were asked to place each of the children's languages on a scale from 1 (worse than monolingual peers) to 5 (better than monolingual peers). The simple questionnaire format, making use of a 5-point Likert scale, was chosen because it was obvious that people who are not engaged in linguistic research are able to make only general evaluations and comparisons of language competences. The respondents were also encouraged to leave comments on various aspects of their children's language abilities. In order to minimise the effect of the participants' subjectivity and to increase the reliability of their responses, clues as to which criteria should be applied, as well as additional explanations (e.g., of interlingual transfer), were provided.

The questionnaire was designed in three languages (English, German, and Polish), initially in Microsoft Word format and later also by means of Google Forms. The Word file and the link to the online questionnaire were sent out to parents of bi-/multilingual children by e-mail. Contact with the respondents was sought mainly via Facebook, primarily on FB groups for parents raising their children with two or more languages (*Uczę swoje dziecko angielskiego* and *Dwujęzyczność dziecięca*), and partly among the present authors' family members and acquaintances. The data was collected from July 2016 to March 2021. All fully completed questionnaires were accepted, provided that the family's economic status was not below average and the child had no language disorders or other communicative difficulties.

Description of the Children

Fifty-one completed questionnaires were subjected to analysis, with each questionnaire providing information about one child. Most respondents (36) referred to one child only, there were five respondents with two children, and one respondent with five children. Even though the questionnaire was addressed at parents or caregivers, all the respondents were actually parents.

At the time of the questionnaire completion, the children were between 1 year and 1 month and 20 years and 6 months old (mean = 7.9 years, SD = 5.5); there were 31 females and 20 males in the described group. The economic status of the children's families was either average (32 children) or higher than average (19 children).³ None of the children had a health deficit which might have influenced the results.

The children had from 2 to 5 native languages or dialects⁴; 38 of them had two L1s, 8—three L1s, 4—four L1s, and 1—five L1s. These were as follows: Polish ($N = 50$), English ($N = 22$), French ($N = 14$), German ($N = 10$), Spanish ($N = 5$), Catalan ($N = 3$), Turkish ($N = 3$), Czech ($N = 2$), Italian ($N = 2$), Hungarian ($N = 2$), Danish ($N = 1$), Arabic ($N = 1$), Mandarin Chinese ($N = 1$), Kunming (a Mandarin Chinese dialect) ($N = 1$), Castiglionesse (an Italian dialect) ($N = 1$), Finnish ($N = 1$), and Polish Sign Language ($N = 1$). All the children have (had) regular contact with all their L1s in natural communicative situations before the age of five. Many were unbalanced bi-/multilinguals, that is, some of their languages were dominant; only 13 children were equally proficient in both/all of their L1s. In addition, 17 children had some knowledge of non-native languages: 11—one, 5—two, and 1—three non-L1s.

For the purposes of the quantitative analysis, the children were divided into four groups, in accordance with the age of each child at the moment of the questionnaire completion. The current knowledge about the functioning of the procedural and declarative memory, as well as the literacy skills development, were taken into consideration. Obviously, we realise that any such divisions are largely artificial, particularly as the age when certain abilities emerge varies significantly from child to child. The following groups were created:

- Group 1: children aged 1–5 (a period of intensive language development with the engagement of procedural memory), $N = 20$;
- Group 2: children aged 5;1–7 (procedural memory is still efficient, but declarative memory develops; literacy skills gradually develop), $N = 8$;
- Group 3: children aged 7;1–12 (procedural memory is still efficient, but declarative memory begins to function effectively; children acquire literacy skills at school); $N = 11$;

³ As indicated by the respondents on a 5-point Likert scale.

⁴ For convenience purposes, we will use the term “language” in the remaining part of the paper in order to denote both a language and a dialect.

- Group 4: children aged 12;1 and older (around puberty declarative memory becomes stronger and procedural memory weaker), $N = 12$.

Obviously, the responses for the last group were partially retrospective.⁵ Due to the small numbers of the children in each of the four groups, no statistical analyses were conducted. In the next section we describe the results and seek answers to the earlier posed research questions.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows all the children's languages, in numbers (no data for reading and writing is included for the youngest groups, since most of these children have not developed literacy skills yet). As can be seen, the children's receptive skills (listening comprehension, reading comprehension) and productive skills (speaking, writing) in each L1 are believed to be mostly comparable to the respective skills of their peers growing up with one language; this trend can be observed in all age groups. Moreover, some L1s are believed to be at a higher level of proficiency than the one represented by monolingual children, though, as a closer analysis of the data reveals, very few children have mastered both/all of their L1s better than their monolingual peers as regards the four language skills. More importantly, not one child represents all skills in both/all of their L1s at a lower level than monolingual children of the same age. Some language deficiencies reported by the parents are as follows: firstly, both the listening and speaking skills in some languages of the youngest children seem to be delayed; secondly, the speaking abilities of the children aged 5;1–7 and older seem to be unstable in some of their languages; thirdly, the older children's writing ability is largely not fully mastered in all of their languages.

Thus, the data is in line with earlier research indicating an asymmetry of young bi-/multilinguals' language competences (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2009; Gósy, 2007; Hoff et al., 2012; Oller et al., 2007; Ordóñez, 2004). As the present study suggests, a delay in the development of some L1s may even occur after early childhood; in fact, literacy skills in some L1s may remain at a low level even in adolescence or early adulthood. Such differences in language competences are often caused by varying input and output in each language (De Houwer, 2009; Grosjean, 1989; Hoff et al., 2012). Indeed, a few respondents⁶ indicate in their comments that certain factors, such as the recency of use of a given language and the possibility to communicate in it with different

⁵ In spite of the retrospective character of some respondents' comments, the present tense is retained in the description of the data, in order to avoid complex structures such as, for example, "some of the children's L1s are reported to be or have been at a higher level of proficiency."

⁶ If a similar comment was provided by 2–5 participants, the number of the respondents was not provided for clarity purposes. Comments made by only one person have not been mentioned.

Table 1

The Parents' Evaluation of Their Children's Language Competences (the Numbers Refer to the Children's L1s, with Reading and Writing Skills Not Taken into Consideration for Groups 1 and 2)

	Group 1 1–5 <i>N</i> = 20	Group 2 5;1–7 <i>N</i> = 8	Group 3 7;1–12 <i>N</i> = 11	Group 4 12;1 and older <i>N</i> = 12	Total <i>N</i> = 51
<i>N</i> of L1s	52 (100%)	18 (100%)	23 (100%)	28 (100%)	121
Reception—listening					
worse than monolingual peers	6 (11.5%)	1 (5.6%)	3 (13.0%)	1 (3.6%)	11
a bit worse than monolingual peers	6 (11.5%)	3 (16.7%)	2 (8.7%)	4 (14.3%)	15
as good as monolingual peers	33 (63.5%)	12 (66.7%)	12 (52.2%)	20 (71.4%)	77
a bit better than monolingual peers	5 (9.6%)	0 (0%)	3 (13.0%)	0 (0.0%)	8
better than monolingual peers	2 (3.8%)	2 (11.1%)	3 (13.0%)	3 (10.7%)	10
Reception—reading					
worse than monolingual peers	--	--	2 (8.7%)	2 (7.1%)	4
a bit worse than monolingual peers	--	--	4 (17.4%)	4 (14.3%)	10
as good as monolingual peers	--	--	12 (52.2%)	19 (67.9%)	31
a bit better than monolingual peers	--	--	3 (13.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3
better than monolingual peers	--	--	2 (8.7%)	3 (10.7%)	5
Production—speaking*					
worse than monolingual peers	10 (19.2%)	2 (11.1%)	3 (13.0%)	2 (7.1%)	17
a bit worse than monolingual peers	7 (13.5%)	6 (33.3%)	3 (13.0%)	5 (17.9%)	21
as good as monolingual peers	20 (38.5%)	7 (38.9%)	10 (43.5%)	16 (57.1%)	53
a bit better than monolingual peers	4 (7.7)	1 (5.6%)	3 (13.0%)	2 (7.1%)	10
better than monolingual peers	5 (9.6%)	2 (11.1%)	4 (17.4%)	3 (10.7%)	14
Production—writing**					
worse than monolingual peers	--	--	6 (26.1%)	4 (14.3%)	10
a bit worse than monolingual peers	--	--	4 (17.4%)	8 (28.6%)	12
as good as monolingual peers	--	--	8 (34.8%)	10 (35.7)	18
a bit better than monolingual peers	--	--	2 (8.7%)	4 (14.3%)	6
better than monolingual peers	--	--	2 (8.7%)	2 (7.1%)	4

* Two children from group one do not speak yet.

** One child from group three does not write in one of her (three) languages.

people and in a variety of contexts, have a significant impact on its development (often at the expense of other languages), especially in early childhood, for example:

For the first five years [of our child's life] we were able to notice that after a 2–3 weeks' stay in a given country, when contact with the other language was very weak, her speaking skills [in this language] deteriorated, she tended to forget words, she stuttered, and wasn't able to formulate her thoughts. After moving to another place a reverse process occurred. From the age of six both languages have been so strong that forgetting hasn't taken place any more. [34/13;2/3]⁷

The teachers at the English school equip the child with knowledge of English in different areas (e.g., mathematics, geography, English, etc.). The child's home, the Polish school, and church fill in slightly different lexical fields, even though there are some common domains. [16/6;9/2]

Nineteen questionnaires include comments about various positive aspects of early bi-/multilingual development. Most of them concentrate on the ease with which children acquire their languages, even those which were introduced later than at birth, for example:

We were really impressed by the speed of the language acquisition of our son. He is learning very fast and he consciously uses many new words in both languages. He likes to repeat new words and phrases after us. [...] [10/1;3/2]

From the earliest years he has communicated with ease, he has a rich vocabulary, he is very talkative. [47/7;3/2]

[Her teachers] say that she uses much wider vocabulary than her peers and applies "adult" expressions. [7/8;10/3]

Such opinions are not surprising—research studies show that with each new language, acquisition becomes easier. This is because the already gained language competences become a source of positive transfer. Furthermore, meta-

⁷The respondents' comments have been edited and checked for spelling and grammar. The comments in Polish and German have been translated into English. All the information which might reveal the identity of the respondents or their children has been removed. At times, translations and explanations have been added in square brackets. At the end of each comment, the number of the questionnaire/child, the child's age at the moment of questionnaire completion, and the number of their L1s, have been provided.

linguistic and metapragmatic sensitivity, which grow as a consequence of multiple language acquisition, may facilitate communication and boost conscious language learning (for an overview, see Cenoz, 2003; Chłopek, 2011: ch. 3.10).

Only six questionnaires include comments on some negative aspects of an early acquisition of two or more languages. One of the participants describes a disruption in the development of all her daughter's languages after intensive contact with her fourth L1: after starting a Catalan-speaking nursery school at the age of two, the child's language competences became unstable and language mixing appeared, even though she had been able to separate her languages (Polish, Spanish, and English); this lasted until the child was about 3.5 years old, after which time she began to separate her languages better [23/3;8/4]. The other five children are reported to present some delay in one or more L1s, for example:

Our daughter began to speak single words [in her three languages] a bit later than her peers (she was about 3 months "late" compared to other children born in the same month or one month younger than her), but within a few weeks she made up for this delay; at the age of 1.5 she could speak Italian using full sentences, even though she always placed the pronoun "I" at the end of the sentence. Simple sentences in Polish appeared about 8–10 months later. [7/8;10/3]

A separate questionnaire item asked about cross-linguistic influence. In order to ensure clarity, no distinction between different cross-linguistic phenomena was made, and the terms "interlingual transfer" and "language mixing" were used interchangeably. As the responses show, more or less intensive CLI was observed in as many as 45 children's speech. Nevertheless, most participants admit that this is a rather rare phenomenon. It is also worth noting that not one respondent expresses any concern about it. Research studies indeed show that language mixing is not very intensive in the case of bi-/multilingual children, compared to foreign language learners (Barnes, 2006; De Houwer, 2005; Hoffmann & Stavans, 2007; Navracscics, 1998). The information provided by the participants also suggests that moderate interlingual transfer within the domains of lexis, morphology, and syntax may be the most common type of CLI in early childhood. Code switching may also appear early in life, though the tendency to switch codes seems to become stronger after early childhood. For example:

Yes, she's mixing her languages a lot, she inserts single Polish words into English sentences (*I've got mleko* ["milk"]). At times she inflects Polish words according to English rules (building plural noun forms: *komputerys* ["computers"], *butelkas* ["bottles"]); she adds Polish verb endings to English words (e.g., *It's mine, not to taczyć* ["don't touch"]). [...] Sometimes there

is a Polish word in an English sentence (*Where is my szczurek?* ["rat"]), other times an English word in a Polish sentence (*H. a story book chciałam* [H. – the child's name, "I wanted a storybook"]). [11/2;8/2]

Since her second birthday, when in a monolingual environment [...], she's been speaking both languages but with the grammar of the language everybody speaks at the moment. For example, when we are on holiday at her Turkish grandparents', she says in French *small a car* (the Turkish way) instead of *a small car* (the French word order); she places verbs at the end of the sentence and uses no articles, like in Turkish. [2/3;0/2]

Yes [he mixed languages], but only sporadically and during the first (three?) years of life. For example, he used to say *csuzdálnia*, combining the [Hungarian] word *csuszda* [...] and the [Polish] word *zjeżdżalnia* ["slide"]. At the very beginning he used to say *niem*, combining the Polish word *nie* and the Hungarian word *nem* ["no"]. [...] [9/8;3/2]

As some respondents' comments indicate, language mixing serves specific purposes. At times, it allows young bi-/multilinguals to compensate for gaps in knowledge and avoid communication problems. A typical situation is when a given lexical item is not yet present in the child's mental lexicon, but its equivalent in another language has already been acquired. Such asymmetry of language skills often stems from the fact that bi-/multilinguals typically use their languages in different situations, in different settings, and with different people (e.g., De Houwer, 2009; Grosjean, 1989). Consequently, some concepts are easier to express in one language, others in another. As some participants point out, young bi-/multilinguals may find it difficult to verbalise some ideas and describe certain situations in some of their languages, for example:

The child mixes his languages when he doesn't know the Polish equivalent [of an English word]. [35/10;5/2]

Language mixing takes place only in the case of a lack of specific vocabulary (e.g., while describing scout customs). [31/12;11/2]

He has always told me very little about what happened at kindergarten or school. He's talked a lot more when asked by his dad or his Hungarian grandma. I guess this has been easier for him, since these events took/take place in Hungarian. [9/8;3/2]

However, switching codes is not necessarily a sign of communication problems. Children may mix their languages in some situations and inhibit non-target languages in others—probably for various reasons, for example:

[...] Recently I've been wondering why he mixes his languages; he inserts a lot of French words [into his Polish utterances] when talking to me, even though I'm using only Polish. I thought that was the only way he could speak, but when my parents came to stay with us for two weeks, he spoke to them in full sentences using only Polish. [5/6;3/2]

It seems that a common reason for code switching is that this strategy makes communication more efficient. Thus, it may occur when a non-target language ensures economy or ease of expression, for example:

[Language] mixing occurs when the need arises to express some information very quickly; in such cases the child switches to Polish [i.e., her stronger language]. [29/11;3/2]

At the very beginning of speech development, the child selected from both languages such words which were easier to pronounce. E.g., he used the Danish word for “car,” because this word is easier to pronounce [than the Polish equivalent], but he used the Polish word for “dog.” [3/5;7/2]

Code switching after early childhood may also be explained by the fact that the rising metalinguistic awareness allows young bi-/multilinguals to consciously choose elements of their languages in order to achieve specific communicative needs. Purposeful, creative language mixing for jocular purposes can be treated as a sign of well-developed metalinguistic awareness (Johnsen, 2022). Such language use has been observed by a few participants, for example:

Mixing [was] frequent and subconscious until primary school, later [it became] rather conscious, for fun. [44/19;2/2]

Moreover, as children grow older, language mixing may become part of communication practices within a bi-/multilingual family. Whereas very young children do not question the practice of separating languages, which sometimes requires repeating the same utterance in two or more languages (e.g., the mother's L1 and the father's L1), older ones may find it unnatural, especially after discovering that there is actually no need to translate. As one respondent writes:

We try to avoid language mixing, but since the child matured and in the case of topics related to the Polish reality language mixing has been more frequent. [40/20;6/2]

Some participants' remarks suggest various factors which shape the frequency and intensity of CLI. One of them is recency of language use. Namely, a recently activated language may override other languages present in the mind, for example:

Subconscious mixing of Mandarin and Polish, most easily noticed after a change in language environment—i.e., soon after coming to Poland or right after returning to China. [27/2;2/4]

Another significant factor that shapes CLI seems to be language proficiency. A more fluent language usually dominates weaker ones, for example:

Polish remained [...] the dominant language and transfer from this language occurred, e.g., Polish prepositions were taken over into German (example: *Was gibt es auf Nachtisch?* ["What's for dessert?," translation of the Polish preposition *na* as German *auf*, instead of *zu*; the correct form is *zum Nachtisch*]), more infrequently: incorrect articles (gender), later also idioms. [44/19;2/2]

Recency of use and language proficiency are factors which often shape CLI (for an overview, see Chłopek, 2011, ch. 4.3). Moreover, fatigue, stress, or illness are indicated by some respondents as potential triggers of language mixing phenomena. Yet another factor mentioned by a few participants is the child's environment, that is, the language mixing habits of family members, for example:

[...] From about the age of three, vocabulary mixing has become infrequent. At present it does occur, but it is used in a conscious and purposeful way, as an accepted way of communicating between family members. [34/13;2/3]

In general, however, the respondents' children are either hardly ever ($N = 21$) or never ($N = 26$) confronted with mixed speech. This may be one reason for the moderate level of code mixing observed in their speech.

Several respondents' comments suggest that bi-/multilingual children are characterised by high metalinguistic awareness, that is, they are able to think about their languages, analyse them, and compare them. Such remarks can be found in 18 questionnaires, for example:

Sometimes he translates words from Polish into Spanish or from Spanish into Polish; at times he uses words in both languages, as if he knew that one object has two names (*nóż* and *cuchillo* [“knife”]). [10/1;3/2]

“Daddy says like this, but mommy says like that.” [2/3;0/2]

At times she compares the Polish and Spanish pronunciation. [17/13;3/4]

Moreover, eight parents of older children (from groups 3 and 4) indicate that they switch codes consciously/purposefully, in order to achieve specific communicative goals (all younger ones are reported to mix their languages subconsciously/automatically). Purposeful language mixing is considered to be a sign of high metalinguistic awareness (Jessner, 2006, pp. 84–119). The present results find support in the respective literature, which indicates particularly high levels of metalinguistic sensitivity of bi-/multilingual children (Hoffmann & Stavans, 2007; Marinova-Todd, Zhao, & Bernhardt, 2010; Navracscics, 1998; Vásquez Carranza, 2009). Metalinguistic skills are a useful tool in the acquisition of both native and foreign languages (Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Jessner, 2006)—which explains another finding, that is, the parents’ high opinions with regard to their children’s language learning aptitude.

A few participants ($N = 8$) also mention high metapragmatic awareness of their children. In particular, they underline their understanding of the fact that people speak different languages, which must be attended to in communication, for example:

She immediately adjusts the language [of communication] to her interlocutor, she is never wrong in this respect. [27/2;2/4]

Our daughter remonstrates when someone addresses her in a language different than their mother tongue. She is used to such communication only. [...] She is aware of the fact that she can speak three languages and that not everyone can understand them. When she wants to communicate something to both her mum and her dad, she repeats the same sentence—in Polish and in French. [19/4;1/3]

Moreover, as the comments suggest, the younger children usually and the older ones almost always mix their languages only if their interlocutor knows both the target and the source language. This is another proof of bi-/multilingual children’s well-developed awareness of other people’s communicative needs, which coincides with previous study results (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2009; Montanari, 2009; Navracscics, 1998). High metapragmatic awareness undoubt-

edly makes it easier for a child to communicate with other people, which in turn ensures better social skills and facilitates language acquisition.

It turns out, however, that the choice—or avoidance—of a given language depends not only on the presence of particular people, but also on the situational context or specific objects or events this language is associated with. A few participants indicate that a certain place, occasion, or topic may trigger the use of a particular language or cause unwillingness to use another one, for example:

I've noticed that when we are in the kitchen he speaks Polish more often, I suppose he associates this language with food. [5/6;3/2]

She doesn't like to speak English outside the home. She won't speak to her kindergarten teacher, who is a native speaker of English [...]. During Skype conversations with her [Polish speaking] grandparents she answers their questions using single words. When playing on her own [...], she talks to her toys switching between both languages [i.e., Polish and English], sentence after sentence. [18/2;10/3]

As some respondents' comments suggest, the intensity and length of exposure to input, along with the proficiency level in each language, are crucial factors influencing language choice or avoidance. For example, a girl who had good receptive knowledge of three languages (Polish, Spanish, Catalan) at the age of two, but was later immersed in a Polish-speaking environment, refused to use the other languages and did not even respond in her father's L1 (Spanish) when addressed by him. However, after intensive contact with her Spanish family at the age of 2;6, the situation changed and at the moment of questionnaire completion she was using four languages (the fourth one was English), with Spanish as the dominant one [21/5;8/4]. Two other cases are a boy [30/4;7/2] and a girl [33/4;7/2] (siblings), whose French (their mother's L1) is weak compared to their Polish (the language of the environment): both of them use Polish words when speaking French even if their interlocutors do not understand Polish.

Additionally, the importance of the attitudes of the close environment for the development of children's bi-/multilingual competences and their language choices must be underlined. One of the questions included in the survey concerned the attitudes towards bi-/multilingualism in the child's immediate environment (i.e., family, school, neighbourhood). As many as 42 respondents state that the knowledge of more than one language is generally perceived as highly desirable and a reason to be proud. A large majority of the participants (except for four who did not leave a comment on this issue) believe that rais-

ing their children bi-/multilingually was the right choice. They treat early bi-/multilingualism as a natural solution, especially if different languages are spoken within the family and in the environment. Since parents' attitudes and engagement are crucial for the development of children's bi-/multilingualism (Paradowski & Michałowska, 2016), it may be argued that this was an important factor in this study as well.

Answers to Research Questions

The first research question was: How do parents/caregivers of children raised in early bi-/multilingualism evaluate their language competences? As the obtained data suggests, a characteristic feature of children raised with two or more L1s is an asymmetry of competences. Young bi-/multilinguals typically have at least one language at a level which is comparable to or at times even higher than the level of young monolinguals' competences; nevertheless, the skills attained in other L1s may be much lower. Very young children's oral skills seem to be at a particularly low level, but even older bi-/multilinguals may encounter problems when speaking in some of their L1s. Also, the ability to write in more than one language may be a serious challenge even for a teenager or a young adult. Thus, as expected (section "Aim of the Study and Research Questions"), the child's age turns out to be a good predictor of their language competences.

The second research question was: How do they perceive cross-linguistic influence in their children's speech? As it turns out, cross-linguistic influence is frequently observed in young bi-/multilingual children's oral utterances; older bi-/multilinguals are usually able to separate their languages very well, though most probably this depends on the language practices of their closest environment. Moderate interlingual transfer within the domains of lexis, morphology, and syntax may be expected in early childhood. Code switching may also appear in the first years of life, but it seems to be more intensive after early childhood. CLI may result from the need to compensate for gaps in knowledge or to ensure economy of expression, or from growing metalinguistic awareness.

Both L1 competences and cross-linguistic influence are reported to depend on certain factors, such as recency of language use or input quality and quantity. The latter factor, along with the proficiency in each language, also has an impact on language choice or avoidance. The attitudes towards bi-/multilingualism and towards language mixing, represented by the child's closest environment, probably belong to crucial variables influencing their bi-/multilingualism.

In spite of low competences in some languages, as well as CLI, parents are impressed by their children's language learning aptitude, not only for their L1s, but also for foreign languages learned at school. Their attitudes towards early bi-/multilingualism are very positive—they consider it to be something desirable or even indispensable in the contemporary world. The results also point to young bi-/multilinguals' high levels of metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness, abilities which can boost successful communication and language acquisition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the present study indicate that parents of children raised with more than one language perceive their bi-/multilingualism in a positive way. They notice an asymmetry of young bi-/multilinguals' competences, which in the case of some language skills may persist until early adulthood, they also indicate moderate cross-linguistic influence in their language production, but they accept them as natural phenomena. They are impressed by their children's language learning aptitude, metalinguistic awareness, and metapragmatic awareness.

Finally, it should be stressed that the respondents were mostly parents sensitive to and interested in the issues related to early bi-/multilingualism, representing positive attitudes towards knowing more than one language, and willing to support their children's language development. Therefore, future research should concentrate on children who acquire more than one L1 with less assistance on the part of their parents.

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Die Wahrnehmung der Eltern/Erzieher von der Zwei-/Mehrsprachigkeit der Kinder

Zusammenfassung

Viele Kinder werden heutzutage mit mehr als einer Muttersprache erzogen. Das Ziel dieser Studie war es zu erkennen, wie Eltern/Erzieher die sprachlichen Kompetenzen der Kinder einschätzen, die mit zwei oder mehr Sprachen von Geburt oder sehr früher Kindheit an aufwachsen. Die erhaltenen Resultate zeigen, dass die Sprachkompetenzen zwei-/mehrsprachiger Kinder ähnlich wie diese ihrer einsprachigen Gleichaltrigen bewertet werden, obwohl sie oft asymmetrisch sind. Zwischensprachliche Einflüsse sind ein verbreitetes Phänomen, welches keine Sorgen der Eltern/Erzieher hervorruft. Die Ergebnisse weisen auch auf bestimmte Faktoren hin, welche die Sprachkompetenzen der Kinder beeinflussen können.

Schlüsselwörter: frühe Zwei- und Mehrsprachigkeit, Erstspracherwerb, zwischensprachliche Einflüsse