The development of functional code switching in bilingual twins: A pragmatic approach

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Linguistic studies on multilingualism that have been published since the 1970s have shown that code-switches by adult multilingual speakers are not incidental but, to the contrary, serve a number of important discourse functions. Code-switches of bilingual children, however, were often interpreted as a result of children’s inability to separate the languages (cf. Taeschner 1983). More recent studies have challenged this opinion and the now prevailing view in language acquisition literature is that bilingual children have two separate systems from the beginning and are thus able to differentiate between their languages from a very early age (cf. De Houwer 1990, Lanza 1997). The insight that language switches of young bilinguals are only partly due to lacking linguistic competence and vocabulary gaps leads to the question what the actual functions of these switches are and how children develop the pragmatic competence that is necessary for adult-like code-switching.

In order to answer the above questions code-switching data from English-German bilingual twins, gathered as part of the PhD project „The development of functional code switching in bilingual twins: A pragmatic approach“, will be presented. The language data were gathered in a longitudinal observational study over a time span of 16 months, during which the twins were between 6;5 (6 years, 5 months) and 7;11 years old. The language switches were analysed using Auer’s (1995) conversation analysis framework and are complemented by a questionnaire on language use and attitudes towards bilingualism in the family. First results of the analysis demonstrate that a certain number of the twins’ language switches are caused by competence and must therefore be interpreted as transfer or code-shift (cf. Silva-Corvalàn 1983). However, the data also contain a number of “true”, adult-like code-switches that are pragmatically motivated and serve important discourse functions in the twins’ bilingual interaction, especially in conflict situations.
References


