

## Dreams of My Mother: Investigating Bilingual Development and Linguistic Identity

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This paper is an autobiographical analysis of my bilingualism and formation of linguistic identities growing up as an ethnic minority in Canada during the 1980s. The conceptualization and meaning of being a “bilingual” is investigated along with bilingual developmental factors that influenced the maintenance of my L2 (Cantonese) in an L1 (English) dominant environment. Linguistic identity is examined in this paper by analyzing the processes of dealing with possessing different linguistic identities and the avoidance of ethnic minority ambivalence and evasion through sociocultural participation. This personal account serves as an example for bilinguals to further explore their own bilingualism, linguistic identities, and understanding of self.

本論文は、著者のバイリンガルの自叙伝的分析と、1980年代にカナダの少数民族として育った自己の言語アイデンティティの形成について述べたものである。具体的には、バイリンガルの概念化やその意味についての研究と、L1（英語）が主要な環境でL2（広東語）を維持できた自己のバイリンガルの発達の要因についての記録である。言語アイデンティティについては、著者の異なる言語アイデンティティを取得する過程と、社会文化的にコミュニティに参加しながら少数民族の心的葛藤による迷いを回避した事例から考察する。この自己の経験談は、バイリンガルの言語アイデンティティや自己の理解を調査した一例である。

“The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself.” (Thales, ancient Greek philosopher)

Reflecting on my childhood and adolescence, I remember that I was often asked about my origins and background. Because we resided in a predominantly monolingual region of Canada, others were often intrigued by my bilingualism and cultural identity.

Whenever questioned about my ability to speak different languages, I simply attributed it to experience, having spent the first 5 years of my life in Hong Kong. I never really understood nor took the time to comprehensively examine my bilingualism and the developmental influences involved in it.

In order to understand my bilingualism and gain a better self-understanding, I sought out and reviewed relevant bilingual, psycholinguistic, and sociocultural academic research. These materials provided conceptualizations of bilingualism and revealed developmental factors that influence how individuals acquire, develop, and maintain bilingualism through sociocultural practices and in various linguistic settings. In addition, it has been found that the particular social contexts an individual participates in are a major factor in the construction of linguistic identities. Andrews (2010) conceptualized the notion of linguistic identity as an identity associated with language and observable in an individual’s choice of using a certain linguistic code for a certain context. In light of these concepts, I examined my own life and learning experiences to gain a deeper understanding of how bilingualism has shaped my identity.

The purpose of this paper is to promote awareness and recognition of bilingual developmental factors and encourage bilinguals to reflect upon their own linguistic backgrounds and identities to better comprehend their self-identities.

### My Background

I was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Three months after my birth, my family moved to Hong Kong where I was raised until age 5. Prior to my entering grade school, my mother had decided to send me back to Canada in hopes of a better education and future and in fear of Hong Kong’s impending transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China in 1997. In Saskatoon, I lived with my aunt, uncle, and cousins. When I started school, I was held back a year due to my lack of English ability and was placed in kindergarten. For the first months, I was unable to communicate in English, but after a

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year, I was able to proficiently use English with classmates, teachers, friends, and family. Midway through grade one, my L1 (Cantonese) became my L2 and English became my L1 as the majority of my time was spent in English settings (school and social) and Cantonese was only used at home with my aunt. Throughout childhood and adolescence, I maintained and continued to develop my L2 Cantonese listening and speaking skills, but my reading and writing skills remained at an elementary level. Based on the Council of Europe's (2014, pp. 26-27) Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages self-assessment grid, to this day my L2 literacy skills remain A2 and my spoken production, interaction, and listening skills are C1. (C is more advanced than A on the CEFR scale, see Appendix A). According to Tse (2000), individuals who hear the heritage language (HL) in the home or community and develop the ability to speak it quite well are unlikely to have high levels of literacy in the HL. Identifying how I managed to maintain and develop a sufficient level of L2 proficiency-particularly in listening and speaking despite my limited exposure to my L2 may shed some light on the factors that are beneficial to developing bilingualism.

### Research Questions

Three primary research questions were examined in this autobiographical analysis of my bilingualism and L2 learning history.

- RQ1. How can bilingualism be defined?
- RQ2. After English became my L1, how did I maintain and develop my L2 (Cantonese) in an L1-dominant environment?
- RQ3. How did I manage and avoid conflict among my linguistic identities?

### Being Bilingual

The traditional monolingual view of a bilingual is one who is equally and fully fluent in two languages (Grosjean, 1982). A native-like command of two languages is used as the benchmark for classifying who counts as bilingual with emphasis being placed on fluency. However, defining bilingualism based only on fluency is problematic due to difficulties determining what fluency actually is, what it is for specific tasks, and what it is in certain domains. Considerations on how to measure fluency also need to be carefully addressed. Moreover, other factors such as regular use of the two languages and the bilingual's need to use or emphasize certain skills (e.g., speaking over writing) for particular social functions need to be considered. A linguistic definition of bilingualism is more

complex than a simple index of fluency. "If one were to count as bilingual those who pass as monolinguals in each language, one would be left with no label for the vast majority of people who use two or more languages regularly but do not have native-like fluency in each language" (Grosjean, 2015, p. 573).

A more flexible definition of bilingualism put forth by Haugen (1969) suggests that bilinguals exist on a spectrum of linguistic proficiencies. An L1 user can produce complete, meaningful utterances in their<sup>1</sup> L2 and from there, proceed through all possible gradations up to skills that enable a person to pass as a native speaker in an L2 environment (Haugen, 1969). Therefore the answer to our first research question may be that bilingualism can be defined as knowing and using at least two languages. Rather than being fully fluent and literate in both languages, most bilinguals live some aspects (e.g., school or work) of their lives in one language and other aspects (e.g., home or community) in the other language. It is possible to have different identities in two languages as the situations lived in one language may not overlap with those lived in another language (Grosjean, 1982). Furthermore, bilingualism can be conceptualized as a communication tool used to access and participate in different cultures and communities (Grosjean, 2015). Hence, this view of bilingualism enables individuals to obtain various perspectives on the world around them through languages rather than solely emphasize their L2 fluency capabilities.

### Bilingual Development Factors

Many bilinguals from first-generation immigrant or ethnic minority families begin as monolinguals by acquiring an L1 or HL in home environments. Once schooling begins, these bilinguals begin L2 acquisition as it is prominently used in educational and social settings, resulting in a gradual linguistic shift, as happened in my own case. Grosjean (1982) argued that the primary factor leading to language acquisition and development is the need for that language, exemplified by study, work, and social interactions. If there is a need for a language, language acquisition will occur.

My bilingual development was predicated on my L2 Cantonese communication needs, primarily with my aunt at home. My aunt was a native Cantonese user and all of our interactions were conducted in this language, providing me with sufficient L2 input and output opportunities. At a young age, I recognized the need to maintain my Cantonese abilities as development of these abilities correlated with how well I could communicate with my aunt. Although the domains of my L2 usage were primarily limited to a single individual, the constant need for L2 usage at home could explain how I was able to avoid language attrition. This contrasts with the perception that children from immigrant or

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ethnic minority families tend to progressively lose their L2 despite having a parent who used the L2 as L1 (Wong Fillmore, 1991).

Meaningful and consistent L2 experiences spent within specific L2 settings can help bilinguals develop the linguistic skills needed to effectively function and integrate within the requirements of the L2 culture. Interactions with L2 communities, social networks, or trips abroad are considered vital factors in bilingual development (Garcia, 1986). The frequency, duration, and quality of meaningful experiences in my travels back to Hong Kong to visit my mother were highly impactful (see Appendix B). By positioning my L2 as my dominant language during these visits, I was able to facilitate L2 learning through social practice and integrative needs. Having access to and adapting to Cantonese-based communities in Hong Kong enabled me to develop my L2 abilities. This relationship between cultural interactions and L2 proficiency development is supported by Norton and Toohey (2001), who “approach the explanation of the success of good language learners on the basis of their access to a variety of conversations in their communities rather than on the basis of their control of a wider variety of linguistic forms or meaning than their peers or on the basis of their speed of acquisition of linguistic forms and meanings” (p. 310).

Vygotsky (1978/1930s) suggested that L2 learning and development occurs as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community. The ability to participate in groups and communities as a competent member is acquired through repeated engagement in and experience with these activities with more competent members of the group or community. Schumann (1986) espoused the importance of acculturation by stating that an individual’s level of L2 acquisition corresponds to the extent of their social and psychological acculturation to the target L2 group. However, Schumann (1986) also believed that as long as individuals have contact with the L2 group and are receptive to the L2 input, successful language acquisition can occur regardless of conformity to the L2 group’s lifestyle and values. Bakhtin (1981) further observed the social nature of language as individuals learn to speak by listening and appropriating others’ utterances. This serves the individual’s communicative intentions by relaying the utterances and meanings they want to convey.

Wei, Milroy, and Ching (2007) stated that L2 social networks established with friends, co-workers, and community businesses and organizations possess the capacity to maintain linguistic norms and facilitate social mechanisms for L2 maintenance. In Saskatoon, such L2 networks did not exist because the Cantonese population was too small. Although I lacked L2 reinforcement through social networks, I was fortunate to have access to an experienced member of my L2 community at home with whom I could maintain

and develop my L2 through repeated interactions. Our household also contained numerous mediums for L2 input (TV, music, films, books, newspapers, and magazines), and my aunt took time to impart her understanding and knowledge in response to questions I had. On my visits to Hong Kong, I was exposed to a wider range of linguistic input from my family and outside sources. Being in the L2-dominant environment allowed me to replicate others’ utterances and speech patterns, appropriating them to suit my communication needs. I attributed my desire to maintain a connection to the city, culture, language, and people of Hong Kong to the early years I spent there. This integrative motivation reflects Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) findings that individuals’ success in acquiring L2 depends not so much on intellectual capacity or language aptitude, but rather on each individual’s attitude toward the other linguistic group and willingness to identify with that group. Even without any formal L2 education, my speaking and listening abilities gradually developed through these two sociocultural avenues of language transmission and acquisition answering the research question of how I was able to maintain my L2 in an L1-dominant environment.

### Linguistic Identity

Morita (2012) stated that identity primarily comes from an individual’s sense of who they are and how others view them in relation to the particular social frameworks or communities of practice they engage in. Linguistic identity is the identity associated with one’s selection and usage of a particular language for a certain purpose and context. This includes cultural and language elements from an individual’s social and cultural groups and represents the type of language speaker an individual wants to be viewed as.

At home, I took on the identity of a Cantonese speaker and outside of the home, that of an English speaker, switching between these two identities depending on the context and interlocutor. My L2 was the dominant language at home and my aunt identified me as a Cantonese speaker. I did not use English with my aunt primarily because she was not a proficient English user, but also because English was simply not the language that we communicated in. We viewed each other as Cantonese speakers and unconsciously, yet intentionally, chose our Cantonese linguistic identities during our interactions. Had I chosen to use English with my aunt, this might have communicated to her that I wanted to be identified as an English speaker, causing confusion and leading her to wonder why I was not using Cantonese or if I was rejecting my ethnic identity. If I had insisted on using the language associated with one of my linguistic identities in the other linguistic context, my messages and intentions could have been misconstrued. It was important for me to recognize the appropriateness of using a certain linguistic identity for a corresponding social context.

## Ethnic Minority Ambivalence/Evasion

Ethnic minority individuals (EMIs) growing up in bilingual environments may not acquire their HL for affective reasons. Tse (2000) defined Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion (EAE) as negative perceptions and feelings one may possess towards their own ethnic or minority group. Occurring primarily in childhood and adolescence, EMIs might favor identification with the dominant ethnic or majority group over association with their minority group, resulting in behavior driven by the need to join the dominant group and conform to its norms. Negative feelings towards their own ethnic group impact the development of the HL, and differing attitudes towards the HL can lead to communication breakdowns between family members and cause a strain on family relations. EAE is also displayed through EMIs' desires to disassociate from perceived negative behaviors of their ethnic minority group. Feelings of embarrassment may arise when parents speak in accented or broken English, use the HL in front of peers, or do not fully understand how to abide by dominant cultural norms (Wong Fillmore, 2000).

Some EMIs may not experience EAE. Those with strong ties to their ethnic group or perceiving themselves as being unable to participate in or be accepted by the dominant group may desire not to join it, thus undergoing a different ethnic identity development process. EMIs might also defend their ethnic group by "putting up a fight" against self-perceived stigmas associated with being a member of the minority group or negative evaluations from the dominant group. This may trigger coping strategies to deal with the negative stigmas, demonstrated by attempts to change how others view the minority group (Tse, 2000). This option is more likely to be chosen if the EMI believes that changing ethnic group membership is not possible or desirable. Other EMIs may simply come to terms with and negotiate their ethnic minority status over a period of time.

## My Linguistic Identity Formation

The need to use my L2 at home was a crucial factor in my bilingual development. In terms of L2 exposure, input, output, and communication opportunities, my home settings were distinctly different when compared to my school and social settings. Early on, I could distinguish my linguistic identities, as communication with my aunt depended on reverting to my identity as a Cantonese speaker. The visits to Hong Kong solidified my Cantonese speaking identity as my L2 shifted to being my dominant language when used with my mother and relatives and within the social practices of the communities I took part in. My early childhood experiences spent living in Hong Kong, the integrative motivation to maintain this cultural bond, and growing up in a Cantonese household (language, food, customs, and entertainment): All of these factors aided in linguistic identity

formation, L2 acquisition, and the prevention of EAE (my bilingualism was additive). Tse (2000) emphasized the positive value of L2 knowledge and use with members outside the family as motivation and proof for EMIs to recognize the additive benefits of bilingualism. By interacting with other L2 users in social networks, spending significant amounts of time in L2 settings, or simply taking the time to use L2 to communicate with parents, bilinguals can develop a positive interpretation of their self-identities and reduce EAE.

In my L1 environment, I strived to gain others' respect by excelling in academics, sports, and social situations, not only because I was cognizant of the dominant group, but also to express my identity in my L1. The promotion of multiculturalism in Canada advocated by educational, public, and government institutions also provided an underlying sense of acceptance and connection between ethnic minorities and the dominant Anglophone Canadian culture. Citizens from different origins converge with high levels of pride and solidarity on a multicultural conception of Canadian nationhood (Kymlicka, 2010). As I got older, I displayed increasing pride in my heritage as I became an "expert" at my school for all things Asian (even when I had no clue) and chose to learn more about the history of Chinese Canadians in particular, another identity I possessed and came to accept as self-validating. Lastly, I owe much to my mother: Our communication has always been in Cantonese and as a result, I was able to maintain my L2. It was her foresight that provided me opportunities to become bilingual and experience the additive benefits of possessing different linguistic identities.

## Conclusion

As Grosjean (1985) stated, a bilingual does not possess two separate monolingual identities, but has a singular, unique identity rooted in two or more cultures and languages, which is linguistically and culturally different from the identity of a monolingual, monocultural person of either culture. Over the years, I have come to realize that I do not have a clear-cut identity. When I go to Hong Kong, the locals occasionally call me "竹升" (*jook-sing*), referring to a bamboo pole in Cantonese. Bamboo is hollow and compartmentalized, thus water poured in one end does not flow out of the other end. The metaphor is that a *jook-sing* is not a part of either culture because the water within a bamboo pole does not flow and connect from one end to the other. The term *jook-sing* holds a negative connotation, yet being one in Hong Kong aided me in claiming my identity and negotiating how I would position myself through my linguistic identities and practices. Being recognized by others as a proficient L2 user enabled me to bridge sociolinguistic environments, a communicative and acculturative ability that is valuable and possible for all bilinguals.



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Growing up I encountered questions such as “What are you?” “What are you doing here?” and “Where did you come from?” as I was not easily identifiable as being Canadian, especially as I lived in Saskatoon where there were few visible ethnic minorities in the population. To this day, I am floating above each culture, but not exactly fitting in, and I have come to accept that it is not my responsibility to fit in; it is okay to possess multiple linguistic identities for different contexts and purposes. Being bilingual and bicultural is a way of life, and I am simply going to do things my way, always moving forward. It is up to others whether they accept or want to “fit into” me and my identity. My advice to bilinguals experiencing uncertainty and difficulties negotiating their linguistic identities is that this process can be made less frustrating by making the decision to openly and honestly acknowledge and accept themselves. By examining the past to know who you are and understand who you have become, you can find the learning and self-awareness that will serve to guide you into the future.

### Note

1. In this paper, *they* and *their* are used as singular pronouns that are not gender specific.

### Bio Data

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## Appendix A

### Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Self-Assessment Grid

Level	Skill	Definition
C1	Listening	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signaled explicitly. I can understand television programs and films without too much effort.
A2	Reading	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.
C1	Spoken interaction	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skillfully to those of other speakers.
C1	Spoken production	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.
A2	Writing	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate needs. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.

Note. Reproduced from <[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)>

## Appendix B

### My Trips to Hong Kong While Growing Up

Time period	Age (in years)	Trip duration
07/1988 – 08/1988	6.7	1 month
07/1990 – 08/1990	8.7	1.5 months
07/1991 – 08/1991	9.7	2 months
07/1993 – 08/1993	11.7	1.5 months
07/1995 – 08/1995	13.7	2 months
07/1997 – 07/1997	15.7	3 weeks
07/1998 – 08/1998	16.7	2 months
07/1999 – 08/1999	17.7	2 months