Trilingual Competence of a Two-year-old
Language Awareness and Language Choice

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This is a case study of a trilingual two-year-old growing up in Japan, who was born to a Chinese mother and a Japanese father with English used as a lingua franca between the parents. Grosjean’s (2001, 2010) exploration of when and how children’s two languages become activated or deactivated (language mode) leads to a consideration of language processing and metalinguistic awareness. Hoffmann (2001) extends the notion of language mode to trilingualism. The present study examines the child’s ability to make appropriate language choices in a monolingual/bilingual/trilingual mode. The data illustrate how factors including the interlocutor and context affect the language mode and are related to the separation of languages, mixing of utterances, and language repairs. This study shows trilingual competence is distinct from monolingual or bilingual competence, and moreover, even within the same trilingual population, it is possible for one child to express a different language mode from other children.

Historically, research on language choice in parent-child conversation tends to be conducted from the parents’ perspective, and is connected with family language policies regarding input strategies such as one-parent-one-language (Dopke, 1992) or parental discourse strategies (Lanza, 2004). However, while family decisions about language use — who can use what language in what situation — are generally made by adults, children can also make language choices due to their “sociocultural mediated capability to act” (Fogle & King, 2013, p. 4). Children begin to think about the relationship between the language and the context in which it is embedded from as young as two years old (Lanza, 2004). This phenomenon, which plays an important role in a child’s developing linguistic

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system(s), is part of children’s metalinguistic awareness: “the ability to think about and reflect upon the nature and functions of language” (Pratt & Grieve, 1984, p. 2). The present research is an exploratory study examining early awareness in and language choices made by an English, Chinese and Japanese trilingual two-year-old, particularly in relation to the child’s perception of the role of the interlocutors and of situational factors.

Literature Review

Early Language Awareness

It is difficult to account for language awareness in young children since they tend not to make explicit comments about language. Hence, evidence of language awareness generally has to be deduced from other things that they say and do (Pratt & Grieve, 1984). Clark (1978) observes that there are a number of areas in which this awareness can be seen, including “making judgements about language, correcting oneself and others, supplying appropriate interpretations for words and sentences” (pp. 17-18). She believes that these appear at different levels of metacognition and identify children’s increasing language awareness. Clark (1978, p. 34) thus distinguishes six levels of awareness reflected indirectly in children’s utterances, arranged from 1 to 6 in their order of emergence: 1. monitoring one’s ongoing utterance; 2. checking the result of an utterance; 3. testing for reality; 4. deliberately trying to learn; 5. predicting the consequences of using inflections, words, phrases, or sentences; and 6. reflecting on the product of an utterance. According to Clark, the Level 1 skill appears from as early as one-and-a-half years old, the Level 2 skill starts from about age four, and the higher levels begin at around age six. The most basic language awareness skill — monitoring one’s ongoing utterances — includes, for example, “repairing one’s own speech spontaneously;” and “adjusting one’s speech to the age and status (and language spoken) of the listener” (Clark, 1978, p. 34). This continuum of metalinguistic skills was later extended by Lanza (2001) to apply not only to monolingual acquisition but also to the evolving awareness of bilingualism. De Houwer (2017), focusing on awareness in bilinguals under six, notes that bilingual aspects of language use are reflected on or monitored, such as “the totality of metacognitive skills needed to allow reflecting on language as an object and the monitoring of one’s own language use and that of others” (p. 83).

When a child evaluates the meaning that is conveyed in communication, factors such as the interlocutors (language abilities, language preferences, habits of mixing and discourse strategies) and situational factors (topics and activities, changes in conversational situation) have to be taken into account. Trilingual awareness of the
interlocutors or contexts have been examined. For example, Chevalier (2012) studied two two-year-old children who were exposed to English, French, and Swiss German from infancy; Montanari (2009) an English-Spanish-Tagalog speaking girl between 1;10 and 2;4; Nibun & Wigglesworth (2014) a one-year-old English-German-Japanese speaking boy; and Quay (2008) a Chinese-English-Japanese speaking trilingual two-year-old.

**Language Mode**

Language mode, as defined by Grosjean (2001, p.3) is “the state of activation of the bilinguals’ languages and language processing mechanisms at a given point in time.” According to Grosjean (2001, 2010), a bilingual’s two languages are always switched on but at different levels: when one language is activated, the other is temporarily deactivated to some extent, rather than being totally switched off. Grosjean (2001) proposes three hypothetical positions related to the level of activation of the two languages, which exist along a language mode continuum. He points out that the base language, A, is always highly activated and the other language, B, is activated to various lesser degrees. A monolingual language mode applies to a bilingual who seldom activates the B language when talking with an interlocutor who is monolingual in A; an intermediate mode to one who partially activates the B language upon the judgement of the interlocutor’s proficiency or preference for that language; and a bilingual mode to one who alternates the two languages with another bilingual who habitually mixes languages (Grosjean, 2001).

Grosjean (2001) recognizes a number of sociolinguistic factors which are influential in defining a child’s language mode, including types of activities, the interlocutor’s language proficiency, parental modelling and discourse strategies. For example, in her study, Quay (2001) describes how activities affected the language use of the trilingual two-year-old, who tended to choose the community language, Japanese, to address either the English or German speaking parent while playing with toys or looking at books. Quay explains that these two activities were part of the child’s routine in his day-care centre and that Japanese was therefore perceived as the appropriate language to use in this situation. In another case study, Quay (2008) observes that in spite of the trilingual girl’s dominance in the community language, Japanese, she mainly selected English when addressing the English father, and used English, Chinese or a mixture of the two with the Chinese mother. This is seen to be related to the child’s assessment of the language abilities of the interlocutors. In a study focusing on children’s language mixing and parental discourse strategies, Lanza (2001) shows how language choice in a bilingual girl relates to her interpretation of her parents’ strategies.
toward her mixed utterances. The girl who was dominant in the community language, Norwegian, tended to mix lexically more with the Norwegian father than with the English mother because the mother only accepted the utterances that she made in English. In contrast, the father used strategies such as “Move-on” and “Codeswitch.” The different parental strategies, which can be placed on a monolingual-bilingual context continuum, encourage the child to adopt a different language mode with each parent who employs a different strategy, and hence lead to very different types of performance in the child’s language production.

**Trilingual Production in Different Language Modes**

While mainly used to describe bilingual production, the notion of language mode has also been extended to the processing of three languages. Based on the level of activation of two other languages (B and C) along with the base language A, Grosjean (2001, p. 20) gives a visual representation of a trilingual in each of the monolingual, bilingual and trilingual modes. Hoffman (2001) similarly adopts the notion of language mode to explain the separation of languages, the use of mixed utterances, and code-switching in trilinguals. She suggests that Grosjean’s three speech modes would generate, at least in theory, seven different language constellations: three monolingual modes, language A, B or C; three bilingual modes consisting of the combinations, A+B, B+C and A+C; and one trilingual mode involving the three languages, A+B+C. However, in her own study, Hoffmann observes that the two trilinguals used either one of their three languages (English, German, or Spanish), or a combination of the community language (English) plus one of the two non-community languages (German or Spanish). The activation of two non-community languages is not observed, and there are no situations where all three languages are used simultaneously, despite the fact that all interlocutors are trilinguals who share the same three languages (Hoffmann, 2001).

**The Study**

This study examines the signs of early language awareness in a trilingual two-year-old. It investigates the child’s capability to make appropriate language choices. In keeping with the research of Grosjean and of Hoffmann, the present study aims to find out how and when the trilingual girl Yu’s languages become activated or deactivated in relation to her metalinguistic awareness of various factors. The following research questions are addressed:

- When is the child in a monolingual mode, and what then determines which one of the three language is activated?
• When is the child in a bilingual mode, and what then determines which two of the three language are activated?
• When is the child in a trilingual mode, and what serves to activate all three languages?

Participants

The trilingual girl, Yu, was born in May, 2014 in Osaka, Japan, to a native Mandarin Chinese speaking mother, who was also the researcher of this study, and a Japanese father. Yu's mother majored in English linguistics in both university in China, and graduate school in the U.K. She had worked as a school teacher in an English-dominant environment for about six years. The mother learned Japanese and became trilingual after she settled in Japan. Yu's father had also received higher education through the medium of English and, at the time of this study, regularly read and wrote in English for his job as a university researcher. He recognized some Chinese characters but did not speak the language. English served as a lingua franca between the couple. Since Yu was born, she had been spoken to in three languages: Chinese, used between her and the mother when the father was absent; English, addressed to her by the father, and which also served as the family language; and Japanese, used for reading books and doing activities related to that language. The child started attending a full-time nursery from 1;10. English was used there in daily activities, led by the English-speaking teachers for about two hours; however, Japanese was the only language spoken among the children, and between the children and the monolingual Japanese teachers who were the main caretakers.

Data Collection and Transcription

Two methods were used to collect the data. The first one was diary entries. The mother kept an observation notebook handy and jotted down significant parts of the child’s conversations which showed her language awareness. The diary entries allowed the mother to review and reflect on the child’s language production. The second method was video-recording. A total of nine videos (as shown in Appendix A) were recorded when the child was aged between 2;3 and 2;5, three video recordings of approximately 25 minutes every month. Each month, one of the three recorded a triadic family conversation (Videos 1, 4 and 7), another showed the father and the daughter speaking in English (Videos 2, 5 and 8) and the third filmed a Chinese session between the mother and the child (Videos 3, 6 and 9). Even in the dyadic videos, three participants were often involved to some extent. However, only one parent was the main interlocutor for the child; the other simply responded occasionally upon request. Video recordings were transcribed and coded in the CHAT format of CHILDES, and
Results

As De Houwer (2017) has noted, children build up expectations about their interlocutors’ language choice through their experience. Appendices C & D show Yu’s language choices in three different contexts.

Separation of Languages in a Monolingual Mode

Awareness of others’ overall language abilities.

Yu’s perception of each parent’s language ability was reflected in her choice of a language, or languages, that the parent knew. For example, when she addressed the father, either English, Japanese, or a combination of the two was selected. Yu never heard any Chinese utterance from the father, from which she may have inferred that he was not a Chinese speaker, and consequently no Chinese statement was made toward him in any video (Appendix C). In the following excerpt, Yu’s awareness of the father’s deficiency in Chinese was evidenced by her refusing to show him a Chinese book (line 2):

*Excerpt 1. at 2:4, from Video 4*

Situation: The child is holding a book in her hands.

1*FAT:* I’ll read it to you.

2 *CHI:* It’s Chinese book. You can’t read, daddy.

On the other hand, Yu observed the mother speaking in both Chinese and English at home and communicating in Japanese with Japanese monolingual speakers in the community. As she realized the mother’s trilingual ability, the child adopted one
of the mother’s three languages or a mixed language in interaction with the mother (Appendix D). In addition, Yu demonstrated an awareness of language(s) used by people outside the nuclear family context:

**Excerpt 2: at 2;3, from the diary**

1 *MOT: What languages do jiji and baba speak?  
2 %eng: What languages do (the Japanese) grandfather and grandmother speak?  
3 *CHI: Japanese.  
4 *MOT: What languages do wài gōng and wài pó speak?  
5 %eng: What languages do (the Chinese) grandfather and grandmother speak?  
6 *CHI: Chinese.  
7 *MOT: What languages does J-sensei speak?  
8 %eng: What language does (the English) teacher J speak?  
9 *CHI: English.  
10 *MOT: How about K sensei?  
11 %eng: How about (the English-Japanese bilingual) teacher K?  
12 *CHI: English and Japanese.

In the above transcript, Yu made judgements about the language abilities of extended family members (lines 1-6) and acquaintances (lines 7-12) not present at the time; this was possible because of her having previously heard them in conversation.

However, as Clark (1978) has noted, the perception of another’s language ability without the support of conversational context is not normally seen in younger children. This was evident for Yu as well, as shown in some exchanges written down in the mother’s diary. Yu did not perceive the English ability of a schoolmate, K, who was born to a native English-speaking father and a Japanese mother but spoke only in Japanese with his peers at school. Yu’s awareness of the boy’s bilingualism was raised only when she heard the boy talking with his father in fluent English outside the school building. This is shown in a discussion between Yu and her mother:

**Excerpt 3. at 2;4, from the diary**

1 *MOT: What language is K and his daddy using just now?  
2 *CHI: English.  
3 *MOT: What languages does K know?  
4 *CHI: Japanese and English.
5 *MOT: Does K speak English with other children at school?
6 *CHI: Only Japanese.

The only language Yu had heard from K at school was Japanese (line 6), which must have caused her to believe that he was a Japanese monolingual speaker. She had hence confined herself to Japanese when interacting with him, while deactivating her English. However, as soon as she noticed the boy speaking in English, she defined him as a bilingual speaker (line 4).

**Lack of awareness of relative proficiencies in languages.**

McClure (1977) finds that young children appear to make binary judgements about linguistic competence: that is, one either knows a language very well or does not know it at all. Yu also seemed to lack the ability to judge others’ proficiency levels at her young age:

**Excerpt 4. at 2;4, from the diary**

1 *MOT: Whose Japanese is better, mummy or daddy?
2 *CHI: Mummy and daddy.
3 *MOT: Whose Chinese is better, mummy or daddy?
4 *CHI: Mummy. Daddy can’t speak Chinese.
5 *MOT: How about Yōu yōu? Whose Chinese is better, mummy or Yōu yōu?
6 %exp: Yōu yōu is her nickname.
7 *CHI: Mummy is good. Yōu yōu is good. Mummy and Yōu yōu can speak Chinese.

As suggested by this conversation, Yu assumed the mother’s Japanese was as good as that of the father (line 2). She also did not make a clear distinction between her Chinese proficiency and her mother’s (line 7). When asked about the father’s Chinese ability, she simply defined him as a person who had no knowledge of Chinese (line 4). In fact, the father understood some of her Chinese words in context and responded to her by using body language (e.g. passing food to her after she made a request to the mother).

**Awareness of language choices in different situations.**

It can be seen from Appendices C and D that Yu primarily responded in English to the father’s English utterances (Video 1 = 29%, Video 4 = 74%, Video 5 = 46%, Video 7 = 75%, Video 8 = 64%, Video 9-2 = 80%), and mainly in English to the mother in conversations involving the three family members (Video 1 = 39%, Video 4
= 89%, Video 7 = 92%, Video 9-2 = 70%), while she primarily used Chinese when she and the mother were talking alone (Video 3 = 52%, Video 6 = 80%, Video 9-1 = 82%). Yu seemed to have distinguished the total repertoire of languages that each parent knew from the one that the parent used in particular situations. Interactions in Video 9 show that Yu changed code with the mother in different contexts, even within a single conversation. In the first, dyadic, half of the conversation, 82% of her utterances addressed to the mother were in Chinese, while 70% were in English during the second, triadic, half of the conversation after the father joined it. The following conversation further confirms her awareness of situational language choice:

**Excerpt 5. at 2;5. from Video 7**

1 *MOT: What language do we use when daddy is not with us?
2 *CHI: Zhōng wén.
3 %eng: Chinese
4 *MOT: What language do we use when daddy is with us?
5 *CHI: English.
6 *MOT: How about the bath time?
7 *CHI: Mā mā and Yǒu yǒu, zhōng wén.
8 %eng: Speak in Chinese between Yu and the mother.

Yu demonstrated an acute consciousness of the different languages used by the mother according to the situations: in Chinese if the father was excluded (lines 1, 2, 6 & 7), and in English if he was included (lines 4 & 5).

**Mixing, Switching and Repairing in a Bilingual Mode**

**Awareness of interlocutors.**

Chevalier (2012) finds that different levels of active trilingualism are largely influenced by the motivating role of caregivers in interaction. Yu usually switched to the language of the parent referred to in the ongoing conversation even when that parent was not physically present. As one exchange in Video 1 showed, when the mother asked her “Is it daddy's cake?” in Chinese, she switched to the father's language and replied in English, “Yes, daddy's cake.” Furthermore, Genesee (2001) attributes children's mixing to mixed language input from the parents. Genesee, Boivin and Nicoladis (1996) confirm that children are very sensitive to the language behaviour of parents. They might be in a more bilingual mode with those who mix or accept mixing words, whereas they are more monolingual with someone who does not do so. In the present study, Yu played cooking games in both triadic English (Video 2, Appendix C)
and dyadic Chinese (Video 6, Appendix D) environments. In the former, only 44% of her utterances followed the father’s language choice, and a mixed/switched code was constantly noted, while in the latter, 81% of the child’s utterances were produced in the mother’s language. It was assumed that the mother’s choice of Chinese (= 99% in Video 6) favourably influenced Yu to think in a monolingual Chinese mode and make utterances like a monolingual Chinese. On the other hand, it was found that 50% of the father’s utterances were made in English, and 43% in Japanese or mixed languages (Video 2). The perception of the father’s high-frequency mixing seemed to have resulted in Yu being at the bilingual end of the language mode continuum when she interacted with him.

De Houwer (2017) reports that bilingual children monitor their own language use through repairs on the structural, pragmatic, or semantic level, either spontaneously or with some prompts. Her awareness of interlocutors appeared to be the main motivation for Yu to repair her own language choice. Many corrections occurred in situations when Yu was speaking in Japanese with the father, but where the mother was involved in the wider context. The perception that the mother was a non-Japanese speaker caused Yu to repair her language choice from Japanese to English. For example, “Mità, tsunetai. Mummy, look, it’s cold” (Video 2), and “Kore. This one, mummy” (Video 4).

**Awareness of topics and activities.**

Oksaar (1978) suggests that topics bound to a location tend to be more available in one language than in another. In Oksaar’s study, the child would code-switch to Swedish in referring to activities carried out at home. Yu’s awareness of an association between a nursery routine, “calendar activity,” and the English language appeared to be one reason why she addressed the mother in English, even though she was capable of using the Chinese equivalents:

*Excerpt 6. at 2;3. from Video 3*

@Situation: The child is role-playing “calendar activity.”

1 *CHI: What’s the weather like today?
2 *MOT: Jīn tiān tiān qì zěn me yáng?
3 %eng: What’s the weather like today?
4 *CHI: Jīn tiān shì sunny and cloudy.
5 %eng: Today is sunny and cloudy.

Yu did not repeat the correct form of the question in Chinese after the mother modelled
it. Even though the child answered the mother’s translated question in Chinese, she switched back to English when processing a Chinese utterance (line 4).

**Awareness of interlocutors’ discourse strategies.**

It would also seem that whether or not language is repaired depends on a child’s awareness of the parental discourse strategies for dealing with his/her inappropriate language choice. The strategy for eliciting the correct forms most often used by Yu’s parents was similar to Lanza’s strategy of “Minimal Grasp,” where an adult requests a different language choice. It should be noted that children’s abilities to understand interlocutors’ communication intentions vary greatly. Some children may not understand a parent’s question and either mistakenly respond to it or ignore it (De Houwer, 1990). In the present study, when Yu asked her parents “How about this one?” in Japanese (Video 5), the mother successfully elicited an English form by reminding her only once to “Say it in English.” However, the father failed many times using the ambiguous prompt “What?” which could be interpreted by the child as a request for repetition using the same language. Even though the same strategy, elicitation, was used by both of her parents, while the mother accommodated the child in a strict monolingual Chinese mode, the father unintentionally kept the child in a bilingual mode.

**Awareness of three linguistic forms in a trilingual mode.**

Evidence of reflecting on language that has been documented for both monolinguals and bilinguals includes evidence of children monitoring the structure, meaning, and the sound of a word (De Houwer, 2017). By a child’s second birthday, s/he may be able to provide real translations from one language to another, spontaneously or when prompted (De Houwer, 2017). Many such translations may be seen as a kind of word definition, especially if they are of the form “ringo is apple” (the Japanese word ringo is translated into English). Pronouncements such as “Mummy says ---” will be made when children offer a translation of the word that they say in the mother’s language. However, as evident in research by Cruz-Ferreira (2006) and De Houwer (1990), soon after the second birthday, the child starts to use the actual names of languages to make explicit comments about what forms in what language they and others use. Yu was able to treat language in this way. Here it is worth noting that Yu’s mother labelled the relevant language from an early stage in the child’s lexical acquisition, which also served as a discourse strategy. Instead of saying “how to say it in mummy’s language,” she more commonly instructed Yu to “say it in Chinese.” The
activation of all three languages was reflected in the self-correction shown in Excerpt 7:

Excerpt 7. at 2:5. from the diary
1 *CHI: I want (to) play /ɬpˈtɛː/.  
2 %exp: /ɬpˈtɛː/ is the IPA representation of the word “upstairs” as Yu said it. Neither the unvoiced nor voiced sound of ‘s’ was clearly pronounced as it would be in /ɬpˈstɛːz/.  
3 *MOT: What do you want to do?  
4 %exp: The mother did not catch her words.  
5 *CHI: /ɬpˈtɛː/.  
6 *MOT: Sorry. Are you talking in English or in Chinese?  
7 *CHI: English. /ɬpˈtɛː/.  
8 *MOT: Zhōng wén shí shí me?  
9 %eng: How to say it in Chinese?  
10 *CHI: Lóu tí.  
11 %eng: Stairs.  
12 *MOT: No, you cannot play on the stairs. It’s dangerous.  
13 *CHI: Not dangerous. /ɬpˈtɛː/.  
14 *MOT: How to say it in Japanese?  
15 *CHI: Wakaranai. I want kick the ball /ɬpˈtɛː/.  
16 %eng: I don’t know.  
17 *MOT: Ah-hah, /ɬpˈstɛːz/!  
18 %exp: The mother understood as the girl pointed at the open ceiling space of the second floor.  
19 *CHI: Yes.

In the extract above, the consciousness of equivalent words across languages was displayed in Yu’s response to the mother. She labelled the form “upstairs” as English (line 7) and the equivalent lóu tí as Chinese (line 10), and expressed, through the Japanese term wakaranai (line 15), that she did not know the Japanese equivalent. Even though the Chinese equivalent she offered was incorrect, and she could not produce a Japanese equivalent, one can clearly say that the child was aware that there were equivalents of “upstairs” in the three languages. The explicit translation that Yu made suggested that she was staying in a trilingual mode, having three sets of vocabulary systems activated at the same point, each labelled by the actual name of the language.

Children’s behaviours reflecting on language as an object may also imply a
monitoring of others’ language use. Correcting others’ utterances requires a child to reflect on language as a system and monitor others’ language use (De Houwer, 2017). Yu advised the mother to speak in Chinese with her when the mother had unconsciously switched to English to discuss an English-related topic. Besides monitoring adults’ language choice, Yu became attentive to the linguistic mistakes made by her parents:

**Excerpt 8. at 2;5, from the diary**

>Situation: The family are having lunch at McDonald’s.
>1 *CHI: Mummy, hamburger, zhòng wén?
>2 %eng: Mummy, how to say hamburger in Chinese?
>3 *MOT: Hãn báo bao.
>4 *CHI: *Nihongo?*
>5 %eng: In Japanese?
>6 *MOT: Hambugu.
>7 %exp: Mother’s Japanese pronunciation of the word was similar to that in English.
>8 *CHI: No, it’s English. Daddy, hamburger, *Nihongo?*
>9 *FAT: Hambaga.
>10 *CHI: Hambaga.
>11 %act: looked at the mother and repeated it.

Yu accepted the Chinese equivalent of the word “hamburger” modelled by the mother (line 3) but commented that the Japanese form was wrong (line 8). Phonological awareness aided her in making a judgement about the mother’s pronunciation of the loanword borrowed from English. She repaired the mother’s Japanese by modelling the correct sound, provided by the father (line 10). Similarly, Silva-Corvalàn (2014) describes how a three-year-old bilingual boy made fun of his grandfather’s English-style pronunciation of a Spanish word. In the above extract, the simultaneous activation of her three languages when monitoring the mother’s language use showed that Yu had similar levels of phonological awareness in the three languages.

**Discussion**

This paper has documented aspects of the trilingual competence of a two-year-old girl, especially her metacognitive skills. Following De Houwer (2017), behaviours showing the two basic cognitive skills which are commonly observed in children under six years old — reflecting on language as an object and monitoring one’s
on-going utterances and those of others — were reviewed. The child in the present study made judgements about languages based on her perception of the interlocutor and contextual factors. Influenced by language ability, language use and discourse strategies of the adults, as well as the types of language required for particular activities, the child activated her three languages to different levels in different language modes.

In addition to aspects that monolinguals are also aware of, features specific to bilinguals, and to some extent trilinguals, are apparent in the data. These include translations, language choices among bilingual or trilingual speakers, and repairing one's own language and that of others in a bilingual or trilingual situation. The existence of behaviours that are specific to trilingual environments suggests that trilingual competence should be differentiated from that of monolinguals or bilinguals. For example, in the present study, in addition to three monolingual modes (A, B and C) and two bilingual modes (a combination of the community language and one of the other two languages: A+B and A+C) found by Hoffmann (2001), the two non-community languages (B+C) and all three languages (A+B+C) were also found to be activated concurrently.

Even after the present study was finished, the author (mother) continued to record observations in a diary, which showed further developments in the child's increasing awareness of language. As discussed earlier in this paper, Yu lacked an awareness of others' relative proficiencies in languages (Excerpt 4). However, shortly after she turned three, Yu commented on the mother's three languages by saying, "Your English and Chinese are good, but your Japanese is different. Your Japanese is not as good as daddy." Yu evaluated her parents' language abilities even more explicitly after her fourth birthday. She said that, "Daddy's Chinese like one-year-old children; Mummy's Japanese like three-year-old children; my English, Chinese and Japanese like ten-year-old children." In other words, she was claiming that her father's Chinese ability resembled that of a one-year-old Chinese monolingual, that her mother's Japanese ability was similar to that of a three-year-old Japanese monolingual, and that her own abilities in English, Chinese, and Japanese resembled those of ten-year-old monolinguals in the three languages. The observation in children of such quantitative judgements about language abilities is a source of potential insights into the development of trilingual language processes.

Yu's metalinguistic awareness has also continued to develop in relation to complex contextual factors, as reflected in her conversational switching strategies. Her situational switching behaviour has been increasingly approaching that of an adult multilingual. She switches, for example, to attract attention, emphasize a request, quote others' utterances or mimic their tones, or to exclude a speaker using a different
language. Additional factors that are specific to bilingual or trilingual environments, such as the role of the child's culture and ethnic background, and the sociolinguistic status of the languages involved, will need to be investigated in the future in order to better understand the emergence of multilingual children's awareness of language.

**Conclusion**

The present study shows how, even at a very early age, a trilingual child may display awareness of extra-linguistic factors and make judgements about language use accordingly. The child in this study selected languages according to the specific interlocutor and situation. She was sensitive to the language mistakes occurring in conversations and attempted to repair her own speech from around two years old; she started to correct others before she turned two and a half, which seemed much earlier than the age when monolinguals do so, “from about four years old on” (Clark, 1978, p. 25), or bilinguals, “as they reach their third birthdays” (De Houwer, 2017, p. 90). The child’s separate use of only one of the three languages, her mixing of two of the languages within the same utterance, and her repairs involving all three languages suggest that trilinguals may operate in any of a monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual mode. Children’s metalinguistic skills have been said to be closely related to their underlying metacognitive development (Clark, 1978). As the child grows, behaviours that reflect her increasing language awareness should coincide with the metalinguistic skills appearing at the higher levels of Clark’s continuum.

**References**


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### Appendix A

**Videos Taken Between 2;3 and 2;5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Main Language</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2;3</td>
<td>25 min</td>
<td>FAT, MOT, CHI</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Play with Lego</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2;3</td>
<td>25 min</td>
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FAT = father; MOT = mother; CHI = child; E = English; C = Chinese

9-1: Chinese conversation between the mother and the child for the first 15 minutes
9-2: English conversation between the three family members for the remaining 15 minutes
Appendix B

Transcription Conventions in Two Coded Transcripts

(1) @Situation: The child was role-playing the school’s “calendar activity.”
   1 *CHI: What’s the weather like today?
   2 %lan: E
   3 *MOT: Jīn tiān tiān qì zěn me yàng?
   4 %lan: C
   5 %eng: What’s the weather like today?
   6 *CHI: Jīn tiān shì sunny and cloudy.
   7 %lan: M (C+E)
   8 %eng: Today is sunny and cloudy.

(2) @Situation: the mother and the child were discussing the language abilities of
    the extended family members.
   1 *MOT: What languages do jiji and baba speak?
   2 %eng: What languages do the Japanese grandfather and grandmother speak?
   3 %lan: M (E+J)
   4 *CHI: Japanese.
   5 *MOT: What languages do wài gōng and wài pó speak?
   6 %eng: What languages do the Chinese grandfather and grandmother speak?
   7 %lan: M (E+C)
   8 *CHI: Chinese.

Transcription Conventions

(Following MacWhinney, 2018)

@Situation: situational information
%lan = type of language
%eng = English translation
%com = general purpose comment
C = Chinese Pinyin (in the romanization system with four diacritics denoting tones)
J = Japanese (in roman letters in italics)
E = English (in standard British orthography)
M = mixed items
Appendix C

Number (and %) of Speech Turns in Each Language when the Child Addresses the Father

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*Note.* Numbers in parentheses show percentages of speech turns rounded to the nearest whole number.

J/E: the child responded in Japanese to an English utterance
E: the child initiated an utterance in English
M: a mixture of Japanese and English
Appendix D

Number (and %) of Speech Turns in Each Language when the Child Addresses the Mother

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**Note.** Numbers in parentheses show percentages of speech turns rounded to the nearest whole number

J/E: the child responded in Japanese to an English utterance

E: the child initiated an utterance in English

M: a mixture of any two of the three languages