

Claude Lafleur

October 22, 2011

Concordia – Babies are naturally bilingual!



Photo : Jacques Nadeau - Le Devoir

Even before birth, babies can already perceive if we are speaking to them in two different languages. This is the surprising finding made by Krista Byers-Heinlein, Psychology Professor at Concordia University and a specialist in child development and language acquisition.

"Babies love to be talked to," she says. "They are always looking to hear the sound of a voice. From the day they are born, they are ready to hear anything. So, whether we speak to them in French, English or Chinese, there's no problem ... And if we speak to them in more than one language at a time, that isn't an issue either!" Dr. Byers-Heinlein observed that even when children are still in their mother's womb, they are able to hear the different languages.

"My research focuses on bilingualism in infancy, she says, on children exposed to two languages (or more) starting from birth. How do they manage these two languages?" she asks. "Because after all, no one told them ahead of time that they would learn French and English at the same time. However, they only need to listen to hear the difference." But how can they tell the difference? That is still a mystery, the researcher admits.

The instinct of language

Dr. Krista Byers-Heinlein also notes that there is a distinct advantage to learning two languages starting from birth. "A baby exposed to two languages early in life is less likely to develop an accent. You could say that when we learn a second language," she says, "we are 'contaminated' by the sounds of our native language, but this is different for a baby learning the two languages at once. That being said, you can learn a language at any age, but as you get older, it becomes more difficult to master the sounds specific to that language, so you may speak with an accent."

"I myself," she said, "grew up in Fredericton, New Brunswick, in an English-speaking family, but at the age of nine, began a French immersion program, so I have a relatively small accent in French. "

It is by a curious coincidence that during her adolescence, she developed a passion for language acquisition. "In high school," she says, "I came across the book *The Language Instinct*, by Steven Pinker. The book was about how we acquire language. What is fascinating about this book is that it argues that language is instinctive; it is something biologically wired in us."

"Until I read this book in 1997, I thought that young children would just repeat what their parents said," she says. "But I found in the book that this is not the case, because, after all, if children were just copying what their parents say, they would never say anything original. However, children invent a lot of sentences, and even when they make mistakes, the mistakes make sense." This is the famous "baby talk" that surprises us and often makes us laugh.

Let's talk to children a lot

"Among other things, I studied mothers who spoke two languages during their pregnancy," she says. "The fetus' hearing is already highly developed in the last months of pregnancy, and they are listening to everything their mother is saying."

With the seven years of research she conducted at Concordia University and elsewhere, the professor of psychology has noted that babies are very good at learning languages. "I am now trying to understand how they are able to distinguish words of different languages," she said. "For example, if I say a certain word, you will know if this word is in French or English, but how do you know that and at what age do you happen to make this distinction?"

She observes that language is very important for babies, and for that reason it is extremely important for them to be spoken to as much as possible. "Every child needs to hear many words, no matter in which language, Krista Byers-Heinlein insists. This is why children who have a talkative mother have an advantage in terms of language development. It's very important to talk to them a lot! "

Parents who are bilingual often wonder if one of them should approach the child in one language and the other in the other language, so that the child does not mix the two languages. "I am often asked this question," reports the specialist. "So far, we do not have any evidence to support this fear. A parent can use both languages; it does not matter because the child can make the difference. What is important is to talk a lot to your baby."

There is also a concern that a child brought up in both languages can become an adult speaking half English, half French – as frequently observed in the younger generation. Surprisingly, the

specialist is formal: “It's not a problem, she says. These individuals are perfectly capable of differentiating between their two languages and are able to use only one language when in the presence of a unilingual person.”

In fact, she says, those who start a sentence in one language and finish in the other – and move back and forth between the two – engage in an advanced type of language use. “This mixing is actually a language skill, she says. It has its own internal rules. Those who are able to speak this way are actually very clever.”

Krista Byers-Heinlein, who at times uses this way of speaking, even adds, smiling, “it can be fun to mix the two languages to better express what you feel. And I don't know a single bilingual person who does not know the difference between their two languages, but sometimes we don't want to make this difference, we want to talk in a bilingual way. There's no problem with that!”