

---

## **Domains in Multilingual Acquisition**

---

**Maya Nair**

*Emory University*

How far does a parent's influence stretch in their child's life? Spanning from political ideology, religious beliefs, to the very words used to convey these stances, children absorb what is repeatedly and directly introduced to them. Their language acquisition, the ability to comprehend a language, can hence be studied through how a child was taught and how they behave in response to these teachings. This is known as "input," referring to the circumstances used to teach a language, while "output" is how the subject behaves in accordance with said teachings (Ellis, 1994, p. 243). However, input is a general term, to specifically determine the input of a parent, there must be a unit of measurement. In this research, "domains" will be used as the primary gauge. Domains encapsulate contextual situations, locations, people, and the importance of "accounting for language choice in many different kinds of speech communities" (Holmes, & Wilson, 2017). When accounting for multiple languages, the terms "L1", "L2", and so on, can be used to describe languages in the order of when they were learned. Thus, a second language may be referred to as "L2." Within these linguistic parameters, the research question, in context with my interviewee, appeared: How does input from L1 (Shanghainese) affect the acquisition and output of L3 (English)? I wondered if my interviewee would display stronger vocabulary and more accurate grammar in English, within domains over which her parents do

not influence (e.g. classroom, parties, college, etc. ). These questions and theories came to be thanks to an interview with my roommate, Emily Luo. Her perkiness when speaking Mandarin motivated me to pick at her brain, transforming my project from a general statement on code-switching to a researchable hypothesis on domains in acquisition.

To test how input from L1 (Shanghainese) affects the acquisition and output of L3 (English), I conducted a formal interview featuring Emily Luo, a Chinese American University student. She is spoken to by her parents in Shanghainese (L1), replies to her parents in Mandarin (L2), and speaks English (L3) outside of her familiar domain. While many may assume that Shanghainese is a dialect of Mandarin, they are, without a doubt, two separate languages. Alongside linguistic and tonal differences, an unknowing Mandarin speaker would not be able to understand Shanghainese. My hypothesis states that Emily's English will be stronger than her Mandarin in domains *without* her parent's influence (eg. parties, classrooms, cafeterias, etc.) This hypothesis also works in reverse. I believe Emily's Mandarin will be stronger than her English in domains with her parent's influence (the kitchen, Chinese restaurants, etc.).

To deepen the understanding of this project, further research on linguistic acquisition was required. Specifically, how and what kinds of inputs affect a child's language learning. To start, *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* by Rod Ellis, a Professor in the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, introduces the main background behind acquisition and parental influence. Ellis (1994) examines a study that researchers conducted to examine the nature of caretaker talk empirically (p. 248). Caretaker talk is a type of input used on children for its notable simplicity and redundant speech structures that easily catch a child's attention. In doing so, a child is easily able to take control over "the development of topics" (Ellis, 1994, p. 249), and thus establish their

own voice. Input reveals itself in many forms. Whether it be formal education from a language school or parents talking to their children in multiple languages, the true beauty is how a child flourishes under it. Through these various types of input, children will develop their agency as language is a tool to choose their own path. Essentially, we now know just how crucial input is to a child's output.

When diving into Shanghainese and Mandarin, two linguistic territories that are not a part of my own, I wondered if lexically there was significance in the language that affected the acquisition between the two and English. It turns out there are multiple fascinating differences between the ways words are conceptualized according to Zhengdao Ye, a researcher at the Australian National University, and her article: *Eating and Drinking in Mandarin and Shanghainese: A Lexical-Conceptual Analysis*. When comparing eating and drinking in Mandarin and English, Ye (2010) points out that under different circumstances English will utilize different words for the same action of consuming something, while Mandarin flips between *hē*, to drink, and *chī*, to eat, depending on the nature of the consumption. For example, in English one does not *eat* pills; one *takes* pills. In Mandarin, when having breast milk, one must always select *chī* because this is a life-sustaining naturalistic consumption (p. 376). Considering these lexical differences, language acquisition seems much more difficult. However, these concepts are mostly second nature to multilingual speakers.

Lastly, when gathering potential questions for the interview, it was vital to base them on grounded sources, rather than personal experience. Jean Lyon, a Consultant Clinical Psychologist on language usage, wrote *Becoming Bilingual: Language Acquisition in a Bilingual Community*, a book dedicated to the inquiry and informing of child acquisition. Lyon (1996) describes 'receptive' and 'productive' bilinguals; 'receptive' bilinguals can only understand a second

language when they hear it while ‘productive’ bilinguals can actively speak it (p. 50). The interviewee is the latter when it comes to her L3, Shanghainese, and the former for her L2, Mandarin. Lyon (1996) also mentions that second language learners receive little correction for their output and lack negative feedback (p. 51). This piece of evidence stuck out to me because I relate to my second language never being corrected. While I’m Indian, Chinese, and Malaysian, my L2 is shockingly Japanese. I learned Japanese from my Aunt, she’s not my blood-related Aunt, but Asian people often refer to an older family-friend as either their Aunt or Uncle. She taught and spoke to me only in Japanese because she was shy to speak in her broken English. My Aunt was my only exposure to learning Japanese, so her linguistic habits became mine as well. Since we were so close, she often knew what I was trying to say even if I used the wrong word or grammar to convey my thoughts. So, she never bothered correcting me and I ended up with horrible grammar habits. I wondered if this was a universal experience. So I dedicated a question to talk about the lack of correction and broken language bilingual children often speak nowadays.

With all this research, I formulated all the questions I wanted to ask Emily. During the interview, my first approach to getting her to relax was to play an easy game of language association. In her mock interview, Emily mentioned that before coming to college, she didn’t know what a “kettle” was in English which prompted her to realize her lack of awareness of many kitchen items. The reasoning behind this is very simple: she only speaks to her mother about kitchenware in Mandarin and therefore knows little to no items in English. To prove my hypothesis that Emily’s English will be weaker in a domain where her parent’s influence is stronger (in this case the kitchen), I showed Emily pictures of kitchenware and had her recall the name in either Mandarin or English. In the data compiled, she was more likely to remember the

items in Mandarin; however, while the data is small, there are a few exceptions. Firstly, Emily says tongs in English because her family uses them only for American food, and in Asian households, ovens are often unused, so she doesn't say it regularly in Mandarin and reduces it to English. Thus, Emily's English is weaker in the Mandarin-oriented familiar domain of the kitchen.

The real interview lasted 2 hours and 37 minutes with a wide variety of questions

Kitchen Item	Recalled the word in Mandarin	Recalled the word in English
Chopsticks	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tea pot	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tea cup	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kettle	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tongs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Soup spoon	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Oven	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

spanning from simply, "What languages do you speak, and which one did you learn first?" to, "What is the first difference you notice when talking to someone who is from Mainland China?" Below are some of the questions and shortened answers from the interview:

1. **Since you have no siblings, how did your parents affect the way in which you learned English through Shanghainese?**

Emily: I don't know if you notice, but I sometimes say 'close the lights' when we are going to bed, and I think it's because in Mandarin the translation for turning off the lights is closing the light! Also, I really just went with what my mother said most of the time! Like because of her, when I was younger, I would say 'peri-meter' in school instead of perimeter and 'kilo-meter' instead of kilometer!

2. **What has been difficult when using the two languages since you grew up speaking them so closely together?**

Emily: Certain cooking techniques just didn't intersect for me! I just never made the connection between certain words, specifically stir-fry! Even frying! Like logically frying is frying no matter what language, but it took me a while to make

the connection that Chǎo was stir-frying! Even toast took me a while! Like I used to have trouble envisioning what stir-frying was because I've only seen the application when it's been referred to in Mandarin!

**3. Can you share a time when you realized how you acquired your language was different from other people?**

Emily: Yes! Oh my gosh, it was when I couldn't properly tell an emotional story to my mom! Like, people can't tell that I'm not the most fluent unless I'm talking about something technical or unless I'm telling a story... Like I can string events together chronologically, but I can't convey the proper emotions and message. I need English for that. I just never told my parents stories as a kid, that's not something you do with Asian parents, that more of a friend's thing. But obviously, I spoke to my friends in English, so I never developed that aspect in Chinese.

**4. What is the first difference you notice when talking to someone who is from Mainland China?**

Emily: My grammar, because I really let my English affect my Mandarin. Like, no one ever corrected me on my grammar, my parents just let me say the wrong stuff. I was talking to my international friends in Mandarin and there was a certain phrase I said that was English grammar but in Chinese. And they were like 'it's not technically wrong, but it sounds weird.' And I was so confused because I use that phrase a lot and my parents never corrected me! There's even a word for contacts in Mandarin but I don't even know what it is because I've been referring to it as a description that I made into a vocabulary term! And I asked my mom,

and she was like ‘Yeah there’s a word for contacts’ but she’s been letting me call it “lenses over eyes” for like five years!

From the extensive interview, there were five major findings within Emily’s language acquisition in terms of her parents’ domains. Firstly, it’s hard to determine the reach of a parent’s influence in a domain. Although language being nuanced is no write-off for this finding, it does illustrate that there cannot be rules and limits to what can be displayed in linguistic acquisition. While I believed that Emily’s English would be stronger at school because her parents are not there to sway her directly, this claim is too two-dimensional to account for how children hold onto a parent’s teachings. There is no hard barrier between each domain, and a parent’s influence can still affect a child’s acquisition.

Secondly, it was difficult for Emily to link specific Mandarin vocabulary to English because she has only had encounters with the words in a parental Chinese-dominated domain. As her mother’s domain extends to all kitchen and cooking-related moments, Emily cannot connect all the foods, kitchenware, and cooking techniques she has experienced in Mandarin to English. Therefore, in domains that parents have strong sway in, Emily’s English is weaker.

Thirdly, in technical and slang terms, she is stronger in English. Her parental domain does not require her to speak any slang or refer to technical terms, resulting in her Mandarin being weaker in this aspect.

Fourthly and surprisingly, her Mandarin may not be as strong even within her parents’ domain because as revealed in the interview, her parents do not correct some of her grammar. Not even Emily knows how much of her grammar is incorrect because she mainly talks only to her parents. Lastly, despite asking Emily questions on language acquisition in English, she unconsciously always brought the interview back to language attrition in Mandarin. This

reflects how self-conscious she is about losing what she has acquired. This reveals that without being in her parents' direct domain at college, she feels as though her English is getting stronger while her Mandarin is getting weaker.

I'd like to proudly say, I believe my hypothesis was correct. Emily's English is generally weaker in her parent's domain while it is generally stronger outside of her parent's domain. There were caveats, but such is the human experience. However, my hypothesis only encompasses Emily Luo and I could not say that it speaks to a wider population. That being said, I've shared this research at multiple symposiums, and I've always been met with the same response: I completely relate. The multilingual experience affects every aspect of life, from family relations to cultural identity. It may play a large part in your life or a very mundane one, but for me, I am proud to engage in so many rich backgrounds. Nevertheless, there has always been a part of me that worried about my Japanese proficiency due to my tumultuous language acquisition journey. After the symposiums, people would tell me all the things they don't know in their respective languages. The funniest one was a friend admitting they had zero linguistic knowledge of furniture; if you asked him, he wouldn't be able to tell you what a leather sofa was in Mandarin! It was comforting to know that no language acquisition journey is perfect and the gaps in grammatical strengths are not something to be ashamed about. My research proves that the multilingual acquisition experience is never perfect or the same, and that is the beauty of it.

### **Bibliography**

Eliss, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Holmes, J. (2008) *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman.

Lyon, J. (1996). *Becoming bilingual: Language acquisition in a bilingual community*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Ye, Z. (2010). *Eating and drinking in Mandarin and Shanghainese: A lexical-conceptual analysis*. In ASCS09: Proceedings of the 9th Conference of the Australasian Society for Cognitive Science (pp. 375- 383). Sydney: Macquarie Center for Cognitive Science.