

Abstract of thesis entitled

**“Language Mixing in an English-Cantonese Bilingual Child
with Uneven Development”**

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This thesis investigates the phenomena of code-mixing and syntactic transfer observed in an English-dominant Cantonese-English bilingual child. Gawlitzek-Maiwald and Tracy’s bootstrapping hypothesis (1996) suggests that code-mixing occurs because bilingual children use their already existing knowledge (of a particular domain in the source language) to acquire new knowledge (a corresponding domain in the target language). The Ivy hypothesis (Bernardini & Schlyter, 2004) suggests that the structure of code-mixing reflects the asymmetry in proficiency in the two languages in children with a ‘Stronger Language’ and a ‘Weaker Language’. These two hypotheses are applied to account for the code-mixing of an unbalanced Cantonese-English bilingual subject, Charlotte, taken from a longitudinal study. It is found that her code-mixed utterances do not match with the predictions of the Ivy Hypothesis which predicts that the Stronger Language should occupy a higher position in the structure tree in a code-mixed utterance. On the other hand, Charlotte’s examples suggest that the Bootstrapping hypothesis accounts for her case better. The Bootstrapping Hypothesis does not limit the direction of mixing from a ‘stronger language’ to a ‘weaker language’ throughout the period when mixing occurs. Rather, the direction of mixing is predicted by which



language of a certain domain is acquired first, i.e. on a domain-specific basis. This is an important consideration for Charlotte as her mixing demonstrates bidirectionality.

The syntactic transfer of *wh-* in situ and null object from Cantonese to English is found in Charlotte's production. This direction of transfer exhibited by the English-dominant child in this study is not consistent with the language dominance hypothesis, which predicts the direction of transfer should be from English to Cantonese, but is consistent with the predictions of the input ambiguity theory (Müller, 1998). However, input ambiguity alone cannot account for the quantitative differences between English-dominant and Cantonese-dominant bilingual children, and the results on null object rates in various Cantonese-English bilingual children suggest that patterns of dominance are correlated to the extent of transfer from Cantonese to English. Therefore, it is concluded that both language dominance and input ambiguity have a role in the syntactic transfer observed in bilingual children, and it is possible that the transfer is initiated by the ambiguous input but the force of transfer is determined by the degree of language dominance.

