

LANGUAGE DOMINANCE REPRESENTATION IN THE UTTERANCES OF A BILINGUAL CHILD: A CASE STUDY OF AN INDONESIAN– JAPANESE CHILD

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to describe how language dominance manifested in the spontaneous speech of a bilingual child. It focused on Ritsuki, a 3.5-year-old girl raised in a Japanese-Indonesian household, whose daily interactions were documented on the *Ueno Family Japan* YouTube channel. This research used psycholinguistics approach, which emphasized that language development was shaped by meaningful interaction and the frequency of use in real-life settings. Using a qualitative case study method, the research examines the child's natural language use across various everyday contexts. For data collection, three video recordings were selected for analysis based on the presence of verbal interactions between Ritsuki and her parents or peers. Each video was transcribed to capture Ritsuki's utterances and to identify patterns of language use. The analysis focused on lexical choices and contextual cues that indicated language preference or dominance. The findings revealed that Ritsuki demonstrated Japanese dominance during structured routines, such as greetings and activities with her Japanese-speaking father. Indonesian was more commonly used in informal, relaxed conversations with her Indonesian mother and during peer interactions. Overall, these patterns suggested that Ritsuki's language dominance was context-dependent, shaped by the speakers she interacted with and the social functions of each language in her environment.

Keywords: bilingualism, child, language dominance, psycholinguistics, utterances

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing number of bilingual children today is not just a reflection of globalization, but also the result of increasingly diverse family and educational backgrounds. Children are now more likely to be exposed to two languages from an early age, with one language commonly used at home and the other encountered at school or in their surrounding environment.

According to Grosjean (2010), bilingual individuals are those who use two or more languages in their daily lives, and bilingualism can appear in many forms depending on the context of language exposure. While bilingualism is often praised for its benefits, such as enhanced cognitive flexibility and broader communication skills (Bialystok, 2001), it can also pose unique challenges, especially in early childhood

when a child's language system is still developing (Paradis, 2011).

One challenge that often goes unnoticed is the issue of language dominance. Even though a child is exposed to two languages, they do not always develop both equally. One language may be used more often, processed more fluently, or become the default in daily interaction. In contrast, the other language may be used less confidently or only in specific settings. Language dominance refers to the relative proficiency and accessibility of one language compared to the other in a bilingual individual's mind (Silva-Corvalán & Treffers-Daller, 2015). Over time, this imbalance can influence not only how a child speaks, but also how they think, express themselves, and interact with others. As Genesee (2006) explains, even balanced bilingual input does not guarantee balanced bilingual proficiency, particularly when one language is used more functionally than the other.

In many situations, a child's dominant language is the one used at school or in the social environment, while the home language becomes less active. This phenomenon is described in sociocultural theory, where language development is closely linked to social interaction and the environment in which a child participates (Vygotsky, 1978). This shift does not always happen on purpose, but it can affect how well the child speaks the home language. The child might use fewer words, produce shorter sentences, or feel less confident when using that language. According to Cummins (2000), the development of a minority or home language may be at risk if the majority language is strongly dominant in academic and social

settings, leading to a gradual language shift or loss.

In addition to sociocultural influences, this research is also guided by Usage-Based Theory (Tomasello, 2003), which emphasizes that children learn language through repeated use in meaningful interactions. Language structures are not acquired through formal rules alone but emerge from real-life experiences and communication. In the case of bilingual children, the frequency and context in which each language is used plays a crucial role in shaping language dominance. The more a child hears and uses a language in daily interactions, the more likely it is to become dominant.

In recent years, several research have looked more closely at how language dominance affects the way bilingual children grow and use language. Salwei & de Diego-Lázaro (2021) studied how language dominance relates to cognitive skills in bilingual children. They found that children who were stronger in one language showed better control when doing mental tasks. This suggests that the dominant language can support thinking skills related to language use. Another study by Gross & Kaushanskaya (2020) looked at how children switch between languages. They found that children who were not very confident in one of their languages were more likely to stop using it during conversation, showing that dominance makes it harder to keep both languages active. Poeste et al. (2019) explored how language dominance is linked to code-mixing, where children use words from both languages in the same sentence. Their research found that when one language is stronger in a certain setting, children tend to mix

languages more often. This means that dominance can shape how children speak in daily life. Finally, a meta-analysis by van Dijk et al. (2022) showed that a child's stronger language can affect how they use their weaker language, especially when forming sentences. This shows why it is important to understand language dominance when studying how bilingual children learn to speak.

This research used selected YouTube videos as the main source of data. The subject is a Japanese-Indonesian bilingual child named Ritsuki, who appears on a family YouTube channel called *Ueno Family Japan*. The channel shares daily activities of Ritsuki's family, which consists of her mother, who is from Indonesia, and her father, who is from Japan. They live together in Japan. The object of analysis is Ritsuki's utterances, which provides valuable examples of how language dominance appears in real contexts of communication between parent and child. Her speech reflects authentic, everyday language use in a bilingual household, offering a unique opportunity to observe language choice, fluency, and code-switching in real time. The goal of this research is to: (1) To identify and categorize the communicative contexts in which Ritsuki employs Indonesian versus Japanese and (2) To analyze the linguistic indicators of dominance in Ritsuki's utterances.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Psycholinguistics

Psycholinguistics is a field that studies the connection between language and the human mind. It focuses on how people learn language,

understand it, and use it in everyday life. This area combines knowledge from both psychology and linguistics to understand the mental processes that make language use possible. Aitchison (2006) explains that psycholinguistics looks at how language is stored and used in the brain, including how people produce and understand spoken or written words. In children, especially those who grow up with two languages, psycholinguistics helps us understand how both languages develop and are organized in the mind.

It is used for studying language dominance, or how one language becomes stronger than the other, and how children move between languages during conversation. By looking at how children use language in real-life situations, psycholinguistics gives helpful insights into how the brain manages two languages. As Heredia & Altarriba (2001) emphasize, bilingual individuals activate both languages in their mind, and understanding how this process works is central to psycholinguistic research. Based from Aitchison's view on mental language organization and Altarriba's insights on bilingual activation, it is clear that language dominance in children reflects both cognitive processing and contextual use. Supporting both languages through meaningful interaction is key to balanced bilingual development.

2.2 Language Development

Language development refers to how children acquire and build language ability over time. It is shaped by both cognitive and social factors. (Tomasello, 2003), in his Used-Based Theory, suggests that children learn language not by memorizing rules, but by using

language meaningfully and repeatedly in real-life situations. This theory emphasizes the importance of exposure and frequency in learning. For bilingual children, the language they hear and use more often in everyday interactions tends to develop more strongly. This supports the idea that language dominance is not only a result of internal ability but also of social interaction and language use patterns in daily life. Supporting this, Yip & Matthews (2007) argue that bilingual language development is influenced by input quantity, quality, and the interactional setting. They emphasize that dominance can shift over time, especially when one language is used more frequently or in more socially meaningful situations than the other.

2.3 Bilingualism

Bilingualism refers to the ability to use two or more languages in everyday life. It is a flexible process that depends on a person's experience, environment, and communication needs. Romaine (1995) explains that bilingualism is not simply about speaking two languages equally, but about how individuals use their languages in different settings and for different purposes. For example, a child may speak one language at home and another at school, which shapes how each language develops over time.

Wei (2007) also emphasizes that bilingual development is strongly influenced by social interaction and the way languages are used within families and communities. The amount and type of input children receive in each language affect their ability to use both languages well. In many bilingual situations, one language becomes more dominant because it is used more often

or in more important contexts, such as education or peer interaction.

2.4 Language Dominance in Bilingual Children

Language dominance Language dominance in bilingual children refers to a situation where one language becomes stronger, more fluent, or more frequently used than the other. This often occurs because the child receives more exposure to one language in their daily life. Fillmore (1991) explains that when children do not receive enough support or opportunity to use their home language, they may gradually stop using it.

In many cases, the language used at school or in the wider community becomes more dominant because it is heard and practiced more often. Meisel (2007) adds that language dominance can influence how children develop their grammar and vocabulary. When one language is used much more than the other, the less-used language may develop more slowly. This often happens in families where only one parent speaks the home language, and the other language is used outside the home. Over time, children may feel more comfortable speaking the dominant language and may avoid using the weaker one. Understanding language dominance helps researchers and educators see how bilingual children grow in their language abilities through real-life experiences and communication.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative descriptive case study design within the framework of psycholinguistics. It aims to explore how language dominance is manifested in the natural speech of a

bilingual child. The research focuses on observing real-life language use rather than conducting experimental or test-based procedures. The approach emphasizes natural interaction and utterances as data to understand the child's language processing and preference. Rahayu (2018) explains that case studies are useful in psycholinguistics because they help researchers see how language develops in real-life situations. They also show how bilingual children use different languages in different ways, depending on the situation.

The subject of this research is Ritsuki, 3.5-year-old bilingual child who appears regularly on the YouTube channel *Ueno Family Japan*. Ritsuki is raised in a bilingual household, with an Indonesian mother and a Japanese father, and the family resides in Japan.

The primary data source consists of three selected videos from the YouTube channel *Ueno Family Japan*. These videos were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. The videos show direct verbal interaction between Ritsuki and her parents, particularly the mother and father.
2. The duration of interaction is sufficient for analysis (approximately 20-40 minutes per video).

The researchers transcribed the selected videos manually, marking each utterance by the speaker (child or parent) and language used (Indonesian or Japanese). Contextual notes were also taken to understand the situation in which the speech occurred.

Each video was watched multiple times. The researchers transcribed Ritsuki's utterances manually, focusing on:

1. Word choice
2. Pauses and hesitation
3. Switching between languages
4. The surrounding context

Every utterance was documented in a data table, which included the video code, Ritsuki's utterances, contextual observation, and the indication of language dominance.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

Based on the two research questions, the Ritsuki's utterances were analyzed based on selected video recordings from the *Ueno Family Japan* YouTube channel. Based on the result, Ritsuki's utterances in three YouTube videos (V1 to V3). The contextual patterns of language in Ritsuki's daily interactions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Contextual Patterns of Language Use in Ritsuki's Daily Interactions

Video code	Context	Interlocutor	Language Used
V1	A kindergarten field trip in Japan (<i>Ensoku</i>), where Ritsuki and her mother prepare for the outing, board the taxi,	Her mother	Indonesian for general conversation with her mother, with Japanese reserved for set rituals.

	and share breakfast-style <i>bento</i> on the way.			
V2	A relaxed Sunday vlog featuring Ritsuki and her father cooking <i>oden</i> at home, where he guides her through steps and she tastes and comments on the food in Japanese	Her Father	Japanese exclusively interacting with her father.	almost when
V3	A playdate visit where Ritsuki meets her friend Haruka and family members bring gifts	Her mother Her friend	Indonesian exchanges with her mother and friend, with Japanese only in fixed phrases.	for most

Meanwhile, Table 2 shows specific indicators, such as Routine & Ritual Contexts, Task-Oriented Interaction, and Informal Social Chat, in each context,

highlighting how these factors reveal whether Ritsuki prefers Indonesian or Japanese in different situations.

Table 2. Language Dominance in Ritsuki’s Utterances

Indicator	Description	Example Utterance	Indication of Language Dominance
Routine & Ritual Contexts	Fixed greetings and mealtime formulas are produced automatically in Japanese.	“Itadakimasu” “Ohayou Gozaimasu” “Oishi”	Japanese
Task-Oriented Interaction	Cooking and activity instructions with her father almost entirely in Japanese	“Sumimasen” “Atsui” “Ich ni san”	Japanese
Informal Social Chat	Casual playdate talk with peers and family	“Kayak mama?” “Papa kerja” “boleh”	Indonesian

4.2 Discussion

a. Contextual Patterns of Language Use in Ritsuki’s Daily Interactions

Ritsuki’s language use depends heavily on the context and the person she interacts with. In V1, which features a kindergarten field trip with her mother, Ritsuki mostly uses Indonesian.

However, she switches to Japanese for ritual expressions such as greetings and mealtime phrases. This suggests that Indonesian is her preferred language in casual, emotional, and everyday home conversations, while Japanese is reserved for culturally embedded routines.

In V2, where she is cooking oden with her father, Ritsuki uses Japanese almost entirely. She listens to instructions, responds naturally, and expresses her thoughts in Japanese. This indicates that Japanese is strongly associated with task-based or instructional settings, particularly with her father who is a native Japanese speaker. The structured nature of the activity and the formal tone of the interaction may reinforce her use of Japanese.

In V3, which involves a playdate with her friend Haruka, Ritsuki again uses Indonesian for most of the conversation, even though Haruka is Japanese. This reflects that Indonesian is her dominant choice in peer-level, informal interactions, especially when accompanied by her mother. Japanese only appears in fixed phrases such as "arigatou", indicating its function in polite or ritual speech.

This aligned with Romaine's (1995) domain-based bilingualism theory, where language choice is influenced by topic, setting, and interlocutor. Ritsuki uses Indonesian in relaxed, familiar, and affective situations, while Japanese appears in structured or culturally expected routines. Her language use is shaped by the function and social meaning of each context, rather than strict language boundaries.

b. Indicators of Language Dominance in Ritsuki's Utterances

Table 2 identifies three main types of interaction: Routine and Ritual Contexts, Task-Oriented Interaction, and Informal Social Chat. These categories help reveal how language dominance appears in Ritsuki's utterances. Each type reflects a different function of language and shows how one language

tends to become more dominant depending on the context.

In Routine and Ritual Contexts, Ritsuki consistently uses Japanese expressions such as "*Itadakimasu*", "*Ohayou Gozaimasu*", and "*Oishii*". These phrases are used automatically, without hesitation, and appear in culturally expected moments like meals or greetings. This suggests that Japanese is more deeply embedded in her routines. According to Usage-Based Theory (Tomasello, 2003), frequent exposure to certain phrases in meaningful, repeated situations leads to stronger mental representation and easier retrieval, which is an indicator of dominance.

In Task-Oriented Interaction, such as cooking with her father, Ritsuki uses Japanese words like "*Sumimasen*", "*Atsui*" and "*Ichini san*". These utterances show that Japanese is the language she uses when following instructions, solving problems, or engaging in activities that require focus. Meisel (2007) explains that dominant languages often appear in cognitively demanding tasks, which aligns with Ritsuki's confident use of Japanese in these contexts.

In contrast, Informal Social Chat is where Indonesian becomes more visible. Phrases like "*Kayak mama*", "*Papa kerja*", and "*boleh*" reflect casual, spontaneous speech often used with her mother or during play. Although Japanese appears occasionally, Indonesian is her main language for emotional, playful, and familiar interaction.

The data in Table 2 suggest that Japanese is dominant in structured, cultural, and cognitive settings, while Indonesian plays a strong role in social

and emotional communication. These patterns support the idea that language dominance is not fixed but emerges through repeated use in particular functional domains. It is shaped by frequency, social role, and the type of activity, showing that bilingual children do not always use both languages equally but strategically based on their needs and experiences.

5. CONCLUSION

This research clearly shows that real-life bilingualism is rarely balanced across all aspects of a child's language development. Although a child may be exposed to two languages from an early age, the way each language develops depends heavily on how often and in what situations the child uses each one. Ritsuki lives in Japan, where most people speak Japanese. She also watches Japanese TV and goes to a Japanese kindergarten. Although she still uses Indonesian at home with her mother, Japanese may become stronger as she grows up. When she starts elementary school and spends more time in a Japanese-speaking setting, she may use Japanese even more. For now, because she spends more time with her mother at home, she still uses Indonesian often, but mixes it with Japanese.

In conclusion, Ritsuki's language use shows how bilingual children learn and choose languages based on who they talk to, what they are doing, and where they are. Her case shows that language dominance is not fixed but depends on daily life and environment. However, the research is based on only three short videos from one YouTube channel, which may not reflect the full range of her language use. Future research should include more recordings over a

longer period, especially as Ritsuki enters elementary school. Observing her in school, with friends, and with other family members could provide deeper insights into how her bilingual skills develop across settings. In conclusion, language dominance is shaped not just by exposure but by how and where each language is used in daily life.

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