My Language Learning History

Ervin and Osgood classified multi-lingual language learning into three forms: coordinate, compound, and subordinate. Here, I will discuss how I learned various languages based on this classification. Chinese (Cantonese) is my first language, which serves as a basis. Although it is not exactly a language, I will also briefly touch on my code-switching practices.

English

English is most likely the second language I learned, even before Mandarin. I started out as a subordinate bilingual, learning English words through their Chinese translations. This is characterized by my choppy and unnatural use of English, which essentially served as a "code" for Chinese, or some sort of advanced pig Latin. I was unable to grasp concepts such as tenses and inflections that were not present in Chinese. For example, I was unable to differentiate "go" and "went", and I often neglected to append an "s" after verbs (third person singular). My English was mostly a word-for-word translation, and was limited by my vocabulary in both languages.

I became a coordinate bilingual somewhere near the age of 6, when I started to learn English *in English*. This was the first time I treated English as a language, instead of some sort of code for Chinese. Even though it was limited to the classroom, I was learning how to *think* in English, which was useful in my language development. Previously, I would think in Chinese, translate it into English, then proofread the sentence according to the grammatical rules I knew. The problem, however, is that translation is difficult, and it is easy to make mistakes in proofreading, especially as a kid. Thinking in English solved those problems. Slowly but surely, I began to develop a "sense" of grammar, where I was able to "feel" if a sentence is grammatically correct or not. I can contrast this with German, where I cannot be sure if a word is in its right form unless if I consciously check for it. This was also when I learned the more subtle rules in English, especially regarding pronunciation. These are all "irregular" rules, or the exceptions to the rules if one were to learn English systematically as a second language. For example, words ending with "s" could be pronounced as a "z" such as in "dogs". Those ending with "ed" might be pronounced as "k", such as "cooked". This was when I started to be more conscious of my English usage, as it was difficult to pick up these details in a non-native environment, yet these details are enough to show my English proficiency is nowhere near native level.

Mandarin

I am a coordinate bilingual for Mandarin. It is harder to classify, as both Cantonese and Mandarin are dialects (depending on who you ask) of the same language. Some background information may be appropriate. The same characters are pronounced in different ways in both dialects. The written script is shared, although it is written according to Mandarin rules. (For those concerned

about traditional vs simplified, they are two different scripts that refer to the same characters in general, similar to the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. For the mathematicians out there, they are almost bijective) These rules are important, because there are different preferred characters for basic vocabulary such as he/she/it, is, no/not, etc between both dialects. There are also differences in word order. However, since I have already learned how to write in Chinese, all I had to know was how to pronounce the same characters in a different dialect. There were rules that suggested how pronunciation might change between both dialects. Just like in English, I failed (and still fail) in every exception to those rules. An interesting phenomenon was that since I knew the language and the written script, I could often *guess* the characters, which ironically made me more complacent, as I was comfortable with my comprehension in Mandarin.

German

I tried learning German through Duolingo as a hobby during Covid. This made me strictly a subordinate bilingual. Unlike the other languages I have learned, there are some important differences. Firstly, I came across this language at 17, meaning language acquisition is much more difficult. I also learned this language after gaining proficiency in Chinese and English, as well as a basic knowledge of Classical Chinese, which taught me how languages worked. I was also able to make conscious decisions regarding language learning. Finally, I had access to another language, English, which was very close to the language I was learning, which made it much more easier to learn German from English. In the process of learning, I tried to think in German, which I believed was crucial to language learning. I had no fantasies of simple one-to-one translations between German and English. Instead, I aspired to learn German *in* German, once I had that level of comprehension. Unlike other languages, I knew from the start it was impossible for me to ever be proficient in this language, so I tried my best to *understand* the language instead. Instead of reciting lists of vocabulary, I only picked the important ones and attempted to associate different words based on conjugation. This was as successful as it could get, as there is a limit to how far guesswork can get you in learning a language. Then I tried learning German through music (metal). This gave me access to a skewed spectrum of vocabulary; I learned "blood" and "death" before "will" (future tense) in German.

Code-switching

I only ever code-switch between Chinese and English, as they are the only languages in which I can easily form a complete sentence. However, there are two main ways I do this. I only even code-switch by sprinkling a few words from another language into a base language. Moreover, the circumstances are different. Hong Kong has been a British colony, and English words find their way into the language very easily. There are monosyllabic words such as "keep" (hold on to) or "short" (problematic, think a shorted circuit) which even follow the same grammatical rules as normal Chinese characters. There is scientific

or academic talk where English is the lingua franca. Although there are official Chinese names for chemical compounds for example, the majority who took Chemistry in English would find it more convenient to use English terminology. There are also modern loanwords, usually related to technology, where I prefer English terms. The Chinese terms are only used officially or among those who do not speak English. To not code-switch is to essentially speak a different social language, which is roughly comparable to the difference between casual conversation and reading out an official text in English.

When I am speaking in English, I do find myself code-switching occasionally. Unfortunately, this is not as common, as those who speak Cantonese can generally speak English, but the opposite does not hold. When I do use English with international friends in high school, I sometimes use proper nouns in Cantonese when they have no English counterpart, when the English counterpart is but a Latin transcription of its Chinese name, or when the English name is not commonly known. I use this for locations, items/concepts in Chinese culture, and nicknames. I confess I do not often code-switch in English, as I almost always converse in Cantonese when we both know the language.

It is also interesting to note when I choose *not* to code-switch. In general, this is due to privacy concerns. Verbally, this is usually during private conversations, where I translate English terms I would otherwise use, such as "UofT", "common room". When written, I would even consciously introduce Cantonese/Classical Chinese elements that would make it difficult for the text to be translated using online tools.