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Linguistic analysis of early language acquisition: a case study of the Black Middle Class South African, 'Born Free' generation in Gauteng

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to assess the presence of language attrition that leads to a language shift in Black middle-class, South African communities, specifically in the Gauteng province. According to the 2011 Census, there is a steady decline in the use of indigenous African languages (Stats SA, 2011). This decrease of indigenous African languages, has gained the attention of many researchers (De Klerk, 1999; Msila, 2014; Kamwangamalu, 2003; Bylund, 2014). While majority of previous studies assess this language shift and language attrition by assessing the language use of adults, the languages that are used in different social contexts and the language use of individuals from different socio-economic statuses, the present study aims to look at language attrition and the language shift that is occurring at the early developmental stages of language acquisition. This study aims to assess whether children with bilingual parents (L1 Sesotho and L2 English) are growing up as bilingual speakers or as monolingual English speakers. This study also sought to assess the lexical development of these young children and what linguistic strategies the children employ during early language acquisition.

In order to achieve the goals set out by this investigation, different methodology techniques were used to gather and analyse data. Parental input and educational input needed to be assessed in order to see what languages the children were exposed to, direct assessment of the children's lexicon needed to be carried in order to assess their lexical development and the gesture production of the children also needed to be assessed. Demographic questionnaires were distributed to parents or caregivers in order for the researcher to gain insight into the language input that the children receive in the home environment. Observational data was collected at the school which is in the Bedfordview region of Gauteng, South Africa to assess the educational input that children receive. Children were also directly assessed in the two languages that their parents spoke (Sesotho and English) in order to assess their proficiency in each language

The findings of this study show that there is a language shift that is currently taking place in this sample group, within the Gauteng province of Black middle-class, South African families. The children of bilingual parents in this specific sample group are developing as monolingual English speakers, with a passive knowledge of their parents L1. The results of this study also found that this is due to the fact that children are predominantly exposed to English in the educational context as well as the home environment. These particular children

show a trend of monolingual development and are adhering to universal theories of monolingual language development. This study also found that children use gesture as a strategy that is employed during language development. The gesture production by the children also indicated a passive knowledge of Sesotho in that they responded gesturally to Sesotho questions, and when they did respond verbally, it was only in English. This study shows the development of the 'born free' population who are exposed to English and how young children in the South African context are currently growing up in the midst of a language shift.