

John Gibbons
University of Western Sydney



In this short paper I wish to document the influence of Josiane Hamers on the seven years Spanish-English Biliteracy Project. Most of the findings from this project are available in Gibbons & Ramirez (2004). We used a range of instruments, many of them based on or influenced by Josiane Hamers, and as part of the research we asked the teenage interviewees to reflect on the instruments. This paper then combines my reflections on the methodology with those of the interviewees.

A major influence on our work was of course the landmark Hamers & Blanc in its (1989) and (2000) editions. However, much of Hamers' article publication was in French, and apart from those papers that she sent to me, these are difficult to access in English dominant countries. Consequently much of her influence came through personal communication and her generous provision of the QIRUL battery of instruments that she developed for her research.

The general view that underlay our research was that many bilingual communities, particularly minority language communities, are profoundly concerned about creating and sustaining high levels of proficiency in both languages that are used in the community. The majority language will often be needed for interaction with friends, family and colleagues from outside the minority community, participation in the mainstream society, and access to the mainstream economy, institutions and services. However, the minority language is often viewed as essential to cultural continuity and identity, to maintaining contact with people in the minority community (and often the region of origin). Furthermore, all else being equal, it is a bonus to know two languages rather than one, and there are few advantages to being monolingual. One of our teenage interviewees wrote «I think to have the chance to be able to communicate in more than one language is a marvellous gift that opens doors to another world (cultures, customs, traditions)».

At the time we did our work, much previous work on bilingualism had focussed mainly on lower levels of proficiency. Hamers influenced us in indicating the importance of full biliteracy including more advanced proficiency, and shaped our view of higher level literacy with comments such as «the 'literacy' use of language which requires a decontextualised use of language» (Hamers & Blanc, 1989: 68). Our work included advanced bilingual proficiency, attempting

to define and operationalise high literate registers of a minority language, and to reveal those factors which supported them. There were then two major strands to our research - examining advanced proficiency and higher registers; and documenting the factors that influenced their development. We developed instruments to examine both aspects, and used them in interviews with 106 teenagers from Spanish speaking backgrounds in Sydney, Australia.

We hoped to provide information for those families that made a decision in favour of high level bilingualism in the absence of bilingual education. In particular we wished to offer some small recompense to the Spanish speaking community in Sydney for the many favours we had received.

Research Structure

To operationalise higher level literacy, we turned to my former colleague Michael Halliday's discussion of register, particularly the effects of technicality, decontextualisation and planning (for a fuller discussions, see Gibbons & Ramirez, 2005: chapter 2).

It was in the *factors* that influence the development of bilingualism that Hamers had her major influence. The factors that create and sustain bilingualism are often grouped into three main categories, that I shall refer to as societal, contact, and attitudinal. This type of categorisation (not always with the same titles) is used by Hamers and Blanc (2000) (and also by Allard and Landry, 1994, among many others). The **Societal** layer is a broad socio-structural area, and it is manifested concretely in the existence of social institutions and media. **Contact** concerns the individual's experience of the social world, particularly social interaction - what language does an individual use with neighbours, in shops and cafés, and with the doctor? Another form of contact is that with the media and education. Spanish education occurred in three ways for our interviewees - in a Spanish speaking country (before migration or during visits), in mainstream schooling (so little as to have almost no effect) and at Saturday school minority language classes. **Attitudes** and beliefs exist within the mind of the individual, although they are mostly socially constructed, and are to some degree negotiated, and are partly shared with others as part of culture. It is important to note however that these three macro-categories interact in complex ways. It is perhaps possible to see them as the layers through which certain factors and variables are realised in different ways.

Research Instruments and Measures

Language Proficiency

The instruments that we developed to examine language proficiency were a range of tests. The Spanish measures were the following: a measure of the interviewees' command of the academic register of science and history (hereafter the *register* measures); a C-test, which examined command of vocabulary and the complex morphology of Spanish; written responses were also evaluated for the interviewees' command of spelling and accents; and finally the recorded

spoken interview was assessed by a panel of Spanish speakers for *accent*, *fluency*, *idiomaticity*, and amount of *code mixing* from English. The English measure was a *cloze* test, which gave a general rough guide to English proficiency.

There was also a self assessment component in which the interviewees estimated their ability to perform a range of tasks, such as understanding a radio talk. These were not vague, open scales about writing and speaking, but rather questions about specific uses of Spanish, such ‘giving a Spanish speaker directions to your school’ - we have to thank Josiane Hamers for this idea.

Societal factors

These were assessed in a variety of ways, in part by examining demographic, geographical, historical and political factors (particularly international, national and local status), but also by examining the resources available to languages, such the availability of media and community facilities. These enable an assessment of the likely vitality of the language in the context, but do not of course enable the examination of any differences between individuals within the language community. This can only be obtained by examining the socio-demographic differences among the individuals. The questions we used for this were influenced by Hamers’ instruments, but also by Richard Clément. They included items on age, sex, and parental or caregiver occupation and level of education.

Contact

It was here that Hamers’ influence was particularly important. Day to day language contact is usually assessed by examining social networks. Much of the pioneering work on language networks (eg. Milroy, 1980), used participant observation as a primary methodology. We were never able to obtain funding to use this methodology, and it was Hamers (1994) who showed us how such data could be collected by questionnaire and interview methods. She also encouraged me in person to include measures not only of the quantity of contact, but also of the quality - the degree to which the contact was important and pleasant. She mentioned a particular teenager in her own research who appeared to obtain no language benefit from her frequent contact with her father. When asked why, the teenager said “I hate my father!”. She also helped us with the concept of ‘distance ties’ such as mail, email and telephone contact.

Our network instruments therefore took the form of questions about major persons in the interviewees’ lives: the degree to which Spanish and English were used with this person, about the frequency of contact, and whether the important person lived with them, and/or went to the same church, club or organisation. The quality questions asked (following Hamers) how important and pleasant the contacts with this person were.

Education and Media Use

We used the number of months spent in a Spanish speaking country above the age of 5 to give a measure of education there. We also asked questions concerning the number of months of Spanish education in mainstream schooling

and Saturday school. Media proved a difficult area to tackle. We needed to know the amount of use of media in each language. Following a suggestion from Richard Clément we did not ask how frequently, but how *recently* the interviewees had used various media in each language - had it been in the last 24 hours, the last week, month, or year? The interviews took place in homes, so we were also able to ask the interviewee or caregiver to show us media (books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, CDs, computer programs etc.) in both languages, and we were able to record an estimate of the number.

Reactions to the instruments

We felt that it would be useful to collect the interviewees' reactions to the questionnaires, and so in each case we asked them for their reaction to the particular questionnaire. The form of the question was open, and they were allowed to type in their response. The wording of the question was:

Is there anything you want to say about these questions?
¿Quieres comentar sobre estas preguntas?

Questionnaire 2 (107 items, mainly on media use and literacy practices) elicited no comments - most interviewees simply answered «no» to the question above, apart from one «interesting». Questionnaire 3 was an intelligence test, which was used as a control. The comments will therefore focus on questionnaires 1 and 4.

Questionnaire 1 (76 items)

The first questionnaire asked initially about the interviewees' background, attempting to discover the extent of their Spanish education, their age upon migration if not Australian born, and issues such as parental occupation, to control for social class. The second part of the questionnaire asked about the contact variables - how often do you see certain people, and the extent of Spanish and English use with them.

The interviewees' comments fell into two distinct classes - quite sharp critical comments, and positive feedback. The following are the comments, cut and pasted in their original form, including their original spelling and capitalisation.

Critical comments

They need more detail.

It is quite correct that the questions needed more detail. We walked a constant tightrope between obtaining maximum information on the one hand, and not overloading and exploiting our young interviewees (this questionnaire alone contained 76 items). The tests and instruments took considerable time as they were.

I THINK THAT SOME OF THE QUESTIONS ARE IRRELEVANT. THE SAME QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN REPEATED SEVERAL TIMES

These questions were repetitive in form - they asked for the same information about each contact - but not in substance.

THIS QUESTION SEEMED TO BE A BIT PERSONAL. AN EXAMPLE IS THE QUESTIONS ABOUT MY PARENTS WORK.

The questions were indeed ‘a bit personal’. There is an ethical issue here. We attempted to handle it by anonymising all the data, but the point is taken.

SOME OTHER QUESTION MAY BE ASSOCIATED WITH THE PERSONS WAY OF LIFE AND HOW IT INTERACTS WITH THE LANGUAGE.

This seems to be a quite analytical comment on the nature of the questions.

Favourable comments

I will list these, with translation of the Spanish in square brackets.

Estan bien. [They are good]

very interesting ones =)

OJALA QUE SEAN MUY UTILES. MUY BUENAS PREGUNTAS. [Heavens! they are very useful. Very good questions.]

This was encouraging because it was clear that some of the interviewees found the experience of completing the first questionnaire an interesting and rewarding one.

Questionnaire 4 (110 items)

This questionnaire had two parts - one a section on strong network ties with intimates, and the second a classic attitude questionnaire. The questionnaire asked about the interviewees’ attitudes to Spanish, to the Hispanic community, to Spanish vitality, to English, and to bilingualism. This attracted a number of comments about the questionnaire.

Along with many ‘no’ responses, one comment added a little information:

me siento un poco mas Colombiano que Uruguayo (estube mas tiempo ahi)

[I feel a bit more Colombian than Uruguayan (I was there for longer)]

Some were favourable:

son buenas

INTERESTING

ITS OK

But most interesting of all were comments that suggested that the interviewees had benefited from the experience of completing the questionnaires, and that this had made them more aware of their own identity.

son preguntas interesante y te hacen pensar [they are interesting questions and they make you think]

they have made me realise how mach spanish is part of me but I have friends from lots of diferent cultures.

THEY HAVE MADE ME REALISE HOW IMPORTANT SPANISH IS TO ME.

It was these comments above all which brought home the value of the instruments, not only to collect data, but to raise the consciousness of the interviewees concerning their own bilingualism. They also made us aware of issues that we would need to address when reusing the instruments.

Effectiveness of the instruments

One means of judging the effectiveness of instruments is simply to see whether they work. Without question the best of the 'factor' questionnaires was the one dealing with attitudes. This should come as no surprise since social psychologists have been refining language attitude questionnaires for at least half a century, and their design and contents are now well established. Responses to *individual items* in the questionnaire in some cases were statistically significantly related to some of the proficiency test scores. Once factor analysis was performed and groupings were established these strengthened even further. The instrument was so sensitive that our innovative tests of command of academic register revealed new profiles of attitudes associated with such registers.

The least successful questionnaire was one that had little influence from QIRUL - the questions concerning domains of use such as cafés and clubs. It may be that these domains really had little influence on our interviewees' bilingualism, but it may also be that the instruments themselves were insufficiently sensitive to detect this influence.

Hamers influenced the section on strong network ties, particularly with the inclusion of an element on 'quality of contact'. Questions in the following form were asked about the following people: all four grandparents; mother and father; older siblings; younger siblings; cousins; other important person in the subjects' life.

MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER / ABUELA MATERNA

These questions are about one of your grandmothers - your mother's mother. Do you understand?

Estas preguntas son sobre una de tus abuelas - la madre de tu madre. ¿Entiendes?

(Item 1)

Is this grandmother still alive?

¿Todavía vive esta abuela?

2 yes / sí

1 no

(Item 2)

How often do (did) you see this grandmother?

¿Con qué frecuencia ves (veías) a esta abuela?

5 more than once a day / más de una vez al día

4 more than once a week / más de una vez a la semana

3 more than once a month / más de una vez al mes

2 more than once a year / más de una vez al año

1 almost never / casi nunca

(Item 3)

What language do (did) you use with this grandmother?

¿En qué idioma hablas (hablabas) con esta abuela?

- 5 almost always Spanish / casi siempre español
- 4 mostly Spanish / mayormente español
- 3 Span and English about equally/tanto español como inglés
- 2 mostly English / mayormente inglés
- 1 almost always English / casi siempre inglés

(Item 4)

Does (did) this grandmother live with or near you?

¿Esta abuela vive o vivía contigo o cerca tuyo?

- 1 no
- 2 near / cerca
- 3 with / con

(Item 5)

Does (did) this grandmother go to the same church, club or organisation as you?

¿Esta abuela concurre o concurría a la misma iglesia, organización o al mismo club que tú?

- 2 yes / sí
- 1 no

(Item 6)

How important to you are (were) your contacts with this grandmother?

¿Cuán importante para ti es o era el contacto con esta abuela?

- 1 no importance / de ninguna importancia
- 2 little importance / de poca importancia
- 3 average importance / de mediana importancia
- 4 much importance / de mucha importancia
- 5 very great importance / de suma importancia

(Item 7)

How pleasant for you are (were) your contacts with this grandmother?

¿Cuán agradable es o era el tiempo que pasas/pasabas con esta abuela?

- 5 very pleasant / muy agradable
- 4 fairly pleasant / bastante agradable
- 3 neither pleasant nor unpleasant/ni agradable ni desagradable
- 2 fairly unpleasant / bastante desagradable
- 1 very unpleasant / muy desagradable

Items 6 and 7 above were included at Hamers' suggestion. The results that they produced were unexpected. The quality of relationship with parents and grandparents was good with only a few exceptions. However, it appeared that development of higher registers was related to the quality of the relationship with older siblings and the significant other, while basic literacy was related to

the quality of the relationship with younger siblings. This can be explained in part by the relative stage of language development of the contactee. Normally older siblings will be at a more advanced stage of language development than the interviewee, so quality contact with them could support development of high register. Friends are likely to be of a similar age, and they may even work on homework together, again fostering the development of academic language. By contrast, younger siblings are normally at a lower stage of language development, so contact with them may support only basic literacy. Overall using Spanish rather than English with intimates had a highly significant relationship overall with proficiency in Spanish, indicating that social network can be profitably examined by Hamerian questionnaires.

It is probably no coincidence that Questionnaire 2 on media use and literacy practices, which had a mid-level influence from Hamers also had a mid-level effectiveness. The most important fact to emerge from this questionnaire was that 'literate talk' - introduced at Hamers' instigation - was an important factor in the development of higher order proficiency.

Conclusion

There are two conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of the above. When quality research methods of the type inspired by Josiane Hamers are used, they can provide both a valuable consciousness raising experience for the respondents and much needed information on minority language maintenance which can be returned to the community from which it has been drawn.

This short paper is in no way worthy of Josiane Hamers' monumental contribution to the study of bilingualism, but documents her powerful and positive influence on this research. I personally will miss Josiane Hamers' humour, company, and joie de vivre. I and many others will miss her outstanding intellect and ability to cut through issues.

References

- Allard, R. & Landry, R. (Eds) (1994) Ethnolinguistic Vitality. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. Special Edition, 105/6.
- Gibbons, J & Ramirez, E. (2004) *Maintaining a Minority Language A Case Study of Hispanic Teenagers* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Hamers, J. (1994). *How do social networks, attitudes and literacy interact in bilingual development?* Paper presented at the Fifth International Conference on Language and Social Psychology, Brisbane.
- Hamers, J. F., & Blanc, M. H. A. (1989) (1st ed.) and (2000) (2nd ed.). *Bilinguality and Bilingualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Milroy, L. (1980). *Language and Social Networks* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.