Accelerated acquisition in English-Spanish bilinguals: The Structural Transfer Hypothesis

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While bilingual children are said to differentiate their two languages as early as the babbling stage, this does not mean that the languages cannot influence one another. In fact, cross-linguistic interference is commonly found in bilingual first-language acquisition. In much of the literature on cross-linguistic interference, a child acquires the target uses of a given syntactic construction in one language later than a monolingual child would (e.g. object drop [1]). Sometimes bilingual children systematically produce types of utterances that monolinguals rarely, if ever, produce [2]—such utterances tend to display some characteristic inherent to one of the child’s languages in the child’s other language. These atypical patterns of language development are taken to be the result of the simultaneous acquisition of two distinct grammars [3].

In this study, I present novel data from CHILDES [4] corpora of spontaneous child speech showing that early bilingualism can also accelerate first language acquisition of syntax. In particular, I look at the development of the C-domain in three English-Spanish bilingual children (ages 1;3 to 3;3), analyzing all wh-question productions for word order, verbal inflection, and information structure; I examine these features in the corpora’s child-directed speech as well. The C-domain is of interest because it is the site of the syntax-pragmatics interface, proposed to be the part of the grammar most susceptible to cross-linguistic interference [1]. Contrary to predictions of cross-linguistic interference, however, English-Spanish bilingual children produce virtually perfect wh-questions in both languages from the earliest stages of development, while English monolinguals make frequent errors of auxiliary omission as late as age 3. While there are some attestations of accelerated phonological and morphological acquisition in the literature, this research is the first to present evidence of acceleration of syntactic acquisition in bilinguals.

I propose the Structural Transfer Hypothesis (STH) to account for the difference in acquisition patterns. Previous studies have proposed that morphosyntactic cross-linguistic interference occurs at the syntax-pragmatics interface when there is an overlap of linear order for some construction in both languages (e.g. wh-questions). In the STH, I retain the ‘interface’ condition proposed in [1] but modify it to accommodate both delay and acceleration; I discard the ‘linear order’ condition in favor of a premise concerning shared hierarchical structure.

The STH entails a commitment to the Gradual Structure-Building Hypothesis of syntactic development [5]: of four major language-development hypotheses entertained, this is the only one that permits the building of syntactic structure on the basis of input (rather than being spurred by maturation or the construction of item-based frames). I argue that the adult-like wh-questions produced in Spanish both by monolingual and bilingual children are the result of an interaction between two factors: one, the simple form of Spanish interrogatives permits children to produce error-free basic questions from the start, so the pressure for them to match the form of those utterances to that of adults’ is reduced, which in turn allows them to attend to other features of the input; and two, Spanish child-directed speech makes frequent use of the C-domain, with an abundance of topicalized objects, an imperative construction with an overt C head, and overt subjects that occupy the CP [6], providing children with a mass of evidence that compels them to project a CP early. In the case of the English-Spanish bilingual child, the well-established CP
that arises on the basis of the input in Spanish transfers over to her English grammar, leading to adult-like productions of English wh-questions. I make plain why no other hypothesis of the development of hierarchical syntactic structure suffices, and also how the omnipresence of required functional items in bilingual children’s English wh-questions contrasts with the all-or-nothing inclusion of those elements in the monolingual English corpus that I analyze as a control.

I explore the implications of these findings for theories of syntactic development as well as for theories of cross-linguistic influence: is structural transfer properly found only at the syntax-pragmatics interface (e.g. topicalization and object-pronoun drop as opposed to inflection and basic word order) as originally proposed for the interference hypothesis? Continuing to pursue answers to this question, I formulate predictions of the STH with respect to further bilingual wh-question patterns in other language pairs. Specifically, I present preliminary data on English-French bilinguals which suggest that the variability in the surface structure of French wh-question constructions precludes cross-linguistic transfer of an accelerating sort from French into English, but, since the pragmatic constraints on wh-question productions do not differ between the two languages, cross-linguistic interference does not arise either, just as predicted.

References