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Title: Language Variation and Experience in the Early Stages of Child Heritage Language Acquisition

Abstract:
The field of heritage language (HL) acquisition has still unanswered questions concerning the linguistic knowledge that heritage speakers (HSs) bring from childhood and how experiential factors affect child HL acquisition (Montrul, Masa, & Armstrong, 2019). This study re-examines the high rates of Differential Object Marking (DOM) omission reported for very young heritage children in naturalistic production, compared to monolingual children. We argue that the inclusion/exclusion of a set of optionally-marked direct objects may account for such findings and show how like-by-like comparisons do not indicate greater omission of DOM during the early stages of HL development.

The only longitudinal study of monolingual children under age 3;0 indicates low rates of DOM omission (15%) in categorical contexts (Rodriguez-Mondoñedo, 2008). Excluded from that analysis, however, were contexts where DOM is optional, such as most Non-human Animate objects, i.e., most animal DOs. Similar research on bilingual children, however, has reported around 75% omission of DOM in required contexts (Ticio, 2015). Crucially, several of the omission “errors” produced by bilingual children correspond to animal DOs, which means that Non-human Animate DOs were included in the Animate category in the bilingual study. Since animal DOs are optionally marked for DOM in Spanish, we argue that the inclusion or exclusion of such objects from the category of “Animate” DOs explains the divergence between monolingual and bilingual omission rates in the literature.

In a first study with two monolingual corpora from CHILDES, we show that the inclusion of Non-human Animate DOs in the Animate category raises monolingual rate of omission from around 15% to 80%, thus approximating the one reported for bilingual speakers. In a second study with two of the bilingual corpora from CHILDES (MacWhinney, 2000) used by Ticio (2015), we show that exclusion of all instances of animal DOs results from the Animate category lowers the rate of omission from around 75% to 20%, now approximating the rate reported for monolingual speakers. These results indicate early convergence between monolingual and bilingual children on their early use of Spanish DOM. Importantly, the bilingual children analyzed here lived in English-speaking communities in the U.S. and were only children to parents that used mostly Spanish in the home (mothers are both NSs and fathers advanced learners of L2 Spanish). This leads us to hypothesize that such degree of exposure to the HL in the home allows bilingual children to acquire both categorical and variable rules of the HL grammar that are considered early-acquired among monolingual children. This hypothesis finds support in the high rates of accuracy with DOM (>80%) among school-aged children from mostly-Spanish-speaking homes (Montrul & Sanchez-Walker, 2013).

Drawing on preliminary data from naturalistic conversation, we suggest that very young child HSs’ knowledge of Spanish DOM is more complex than assumed in the literature, if language variation and experiential factors are we carefully considered. Implications for the source of HL differences during the school years and beyond will be discussed.