Cross-Linguistics Effects of InAppropriate Subject Use in Bilingual Children

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Bilingualism is a linguistic ability found commonly throughout the world, and all languages have specific rules that govern their usage. English requires the use of overt subjects, whereas Spanish prefers null subjects except to mark a discontinuous topic. This study expands on prior research on the representation of bilingual grammars. Using two types of comprehension tasks (a Forced-Choice Task in Spanish and an Acceptability Judgment Task in Spanish and English) we explore to what extent L1-Spanish-L2-English heritage bilingual children exhibit cross-linguistic influence in their representation of null subjects. We also explore the degree to which their environment affects their L2 using a background questionnaire encompassing general at-home language use. Our team focused on testing two variables: 1) null/overt subject and 2) (dis)continuous topics. The results should show that Spanish-dominant children have intact grammatical knowledge of appropriate subject use in their L1, and will carry that practice onto their L2 resulting in higher acceptability of ungrammatical utterances in English. These results will provide a better understanding of how cross-linguistic influence affects syntax and pragmatics. We hope that educational practices will have more tools to help children succeed with their unique bilingual abilities as opposed to treating individuals with a “one method fits all” approach.

Heritage speakers (HS) are those who grow up speaking a language in the household that is different than that of the general society. This study expands on previous research on children HS. A point of contention for bilingual grammars is at the pragmatic-syntax interface: in English, overt subjects are obligatory from the syntax (re: EPP); in Spanish, null subjects are preferred, while overt subjects are pragmatically required for discontinuous topics and emphasis. It is often preached that literacy is important for developing children; this study compared literacy capabilities of HS with results from an Acceptability Judgement Test (AJT) in Spanish and a verbal morphology test (BESA). The AJT focused on two variables: 1) null/overt subjects and 2) (dis)continuous topics; the BESA determined if children had acquired Spanish verbal morphology, which is theorized to license null subjects. Results revealed insignificance for both the AJT and BESA in relation to literacy in Spanish or English.