The Impact of Bilingual Children’s Acquisition of Spanish Morpho-Syntax on Perceptions of Their Fluency by Caretakers

This study expands on previous research on heritage Spanish speakers, “those who acquire an L1 [first language] grammar… [and] go on to acquire an L2 [second language] grammar so much as to become the dominant language for the remainder of their life” (Sánchez 2013). This study makes use of data collected from the BESA (BESA; Peña, E., Gutierrez-Clellen, V., Iglesias, A., Goldstein, B., Bedore, L. 2014), a production task that assesses verb-ending acquisition, administered to heritage and L2 Spanish-speaking children ages 4 to 6 enrolled in bilingual education schools in NJ. These results were compared to their caretaker’s perception of their child’s Spanish fluency in comparison to other (mono- and bilingual) children, measured on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, collected from a language questionnaire administered to caretakers about their children. Results found no significant correlations between the children’s performance and their caretaker’s perceptions of their fluency. This has implications for both populations of parents and children. The caretakers of L2 children almost consistently rated their child’s proficiency in comparison to monolingual children as 2; there is a disconnect between what the children are learning and what their parents are being informed about on their progress in Spanish. Of theoretical interest, the parents of heritage speakers are not attending (at least specifically or primarily) to their child’s ability to produce grammatically expected third-person present tense verbs (e.g. he runs, he is running ~ corre, está corriendo) when assessing their proficiency. A more specific language questionnaire, teasing apart the domains of proficiency, would help to make understood what parents attend to when determining their child’s proficiency in comparison to others.