

Acquisition of structured morphosyntactic variation in a bilingual setting: Children's Spanish subject pronoun expression in the U.S. Pacific Northwest

Naomi Lapidus Shin & Jackelyn Van Buren (*University of New Mexico*)

Language acquisition scholars claim that bilinguals who speak so-called 'pro-drop' and 'non-pro-drop' languages tend to overproduce subject pronouns in their pro-drop language, resulting in "pragmatically inappropriate" usage (Sorace 2011:4, see also Silva Corvalán 2014:163). Nevertheless, variationist research has yielded mixed results regarding whether Spanish subject pronoun use (*yo voy ~ voy* 'I go') changes as a result of language contact. Some scholars have found evidence of change (e.g. Otheguy & Zentella 2012), but others have not (e.g. Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996, 1997; Torres-Cacoulllos & Travis 2011).

The current study adds to the literature on bilingual acquisition and language contact by examining subject pronoun expression in sociolinguistic interviews conducted with a) English-Spanish bilingual children of Mexican-descent residing in the U.S. Northwest (N = 11, ages 6-8), and b) monolingual Spanish-speaking children in Mexico (N = 37, ages 6-8). All verbs occurring with or without a subject pronoun in variable contexts were extracted (bilinguals: 1504 verbs; monolinguals: 2305 verbs). Mixed effects logistic regressions run in *Rbrul* (Johnson 2009) included two random factors, Speaker and Verb lexeme; two fixed social factors, Age and Gender; and five fixed linguistic factors routinely shown to constrain pronoun use among adults: Person/number, Reference, TMA, Clause type, and Semantic class of the verb.

Results show that bilingual children produced higher rates of subject pronouns than monolingual children did (14%, 9%, respectively), but their patterns of use were similar. The same predictors significantly constrained both group's pronoun use: Person and Reference. The direction of the effects was mostly the same for both groups and similar to patterns found among adults: 1sg and switch-reference favored pronoun expression; 1pl and 3pl and same-reference favored omission. Our general conclusion, then, is that while bilingual children may produce higher rates of subject pronouns overall, monolingual and bilingual children are very similar with respect to the variable grammar underlying the distribution of pronoun expression.

One difference between the groups was that 2sg verbs favored *tú* expression among the monolinguals and omission among the bilinguals, which we explain by examining referent specificity and reported speech contexts. The monolingual children tended to express *specific tú* more often than *nonspecific tú* (25%, 8%, respectively). This is similar to rates reported for adults in Mexico (21%, 8%, in Michnowicz 2015). Yet, 80% of the monolingual children's 2sg subjects were specific, which is a high rate of specific 2sg referents compared to Mexican adults who frequently produce nonspecific 2sg referents (63% nonspecific, 37% specific in Michnowicz 2015), and compared to the bilingual children in our study (49% nonspecific, 51% specific). Thus the greater proportion of specific 2sg referents increased the children's overall rate of *tú* expression. Furthermore, a closer inspection of the monolingual children's specific 2sg tokens suggests that their relatively high rate of *specific tú* (25%) is in part due to a large amount of reported speech contexts that rendered specific *tú* expression pragmatically appropriate.

References

- Bayley, Robert, and Lucinda Pease-Álvarez. 1997. Null Pronoun Variation in Mexican-Descent Children's Narrative Discourse." *Language Variation and Change* 9. 349–71.
- Bayley, Robert & Lucinda Pease-Álvarez. 1996. Null and expressed pronoun variation in Mexican-descent children's Spanish. In Jennifer Arnold, Renee Blake & Brad Davidson (eds.). *Sociolinguistic variation: Data, theory, and analysis*, 85–99. Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information.
- Johnson, Daniel Ezra. 2009. Getting off the GoldVarb Standard: Introducing Rbrul for Mixed-Effects Variable Rule Analysis. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 3(1). 359–83.
- Michnowicz, Jim. 2015. Subject pronoun expression in contact with Maya in Yucatan Spanish. In Ana Carvalho, Rafael Orozco, & Naomi L. Shin (eds.), *Subject pronoun expression in Spanish: A cross-dialectal perspective*. Georgetown University Press.
- Otheguy, Ricardo & Ana Celia Zentella. 2012. *Spanish in New York: Language contact, dialectal leveling, and structural continuity*. Oxford University Press.
- Silva-Corvalán, Carmen. 2014. *Bilingual Language Acquisition: Spanish and English in the First Six Years*. Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sorace, Antonella. 2011. Pinning down the Concept of Interface in Bilingual Development: A Reply to Peer Commentaries. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism* 1(1). 1-33.
- Torres Cacoullos, Rena and Catherine Travis. 2011. Testing convergence via code-switching: priming and the structure of variable subject expression. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 15(3). 241-267