

# Clitic omission in bilingual Portuguese-Spanish acquisition

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**1. Introduction.** We present the results of an experiment designed to investigate whether there is clitic omission in European Portuguese (EP)-Peninsular Spanish (PS) bilingual children. These two languages are typologically close but differ in what concerns clitic placement and legitimate contexts of clitic omission. Previous studies have shown that there are differences between languages in what concerns clitic omission in monolingual acquisition (cf. Varlokosta et al. 2015 for a review): in European Portuguese there are higher rates of clitic omission arguably as the result of an overgeneralization of null objects (Costa and Lobo 2006; a.o.). In bilingual acquisition, several authors have argued that both systems develop separately; crosslinguistic influences may, however, be found in some interface areas (including clitics) (Hulk & Müller 2000; Müller & Hulk 2001). Following previous studies, we considered the following questions: i) Is the developmental path of bilingual children similar to the one of monolinguals? ii) Do bilingual speakers distinguish the two systems? iii) Are bilingual speakers subject to crosslinguistic interferences? iv) If so, in which direction? Lower omission in EP or more omission in PS? v) Are bilingual speakers sensitive to the morphosyntactic contexts where omission is legitimate?

**2. Methodology.** *Participants:* 59 bilingual children aged between 3;0 and 5;11, divided in 3 age groups and 11 bilingual adults. They were mostly simultaneous bilinguals, speaking both languages at home, living in Portugal. Children were attending a Spanish School, where they are taught mainly in Spanish. We also tested monolingual EP children and adults living in Portugal (40 children aged between 4;1 and 5;10 and 21 adults) and monolingual Spanish children and adults living in Madrid (44 children aged between 3;2 and 5;11 and 12 adults). *Method:* We applied a production task eliciting 3rd singular clitics with the support of pictures in 3 different contexts, comprising 34 items in total: i) accusative clitic in a simple sentence – 12 items; ii) accusative clitic in islands – 12 items; iii) reflexive clitic – 10 items. Monolingual speakers were tested either with the Spanish or Portuguese version; bilingual speakers were tested in both languages, first in Spanish and then in Portuguese in different occasions. *Coding:* The results were codified according to the following answer types: i) target clitic; ii) omission; iii) strong pronoun; iv) DP ; v) other answer.

**3. Results and discussion.** Due to space limitations, we only present the rates of clitic omission in each group and in each condition:

	Portuguese Monolinguals			Bilinguals in Portuguese		
	Acc. Simple S.	Acc. Island	Reflexive	Acc. Simple S.	Acc. Island	Reflexive
3 year-olds	--	--	--	51,6 %	60,7 %	21,4 %
4 year-olds	54,2 %	42 %	27%	49,6 %	48,4 %	21,9 %
5 year-olds	45 %	35 %	14%	57,8 %	45,1 %	25,9 %
adults	4,8 %	0	0,95%	10,6 %	3,8 %	0
	Spanish Monolinguals			Bilinguals in Spanish		
	Acc. Simple S.	Acc. Island	Reflexive	Acc. Simple S.	Acc. Island	Reflexive
3 year-olds	23,9 %	3,3 %	6 %	52,6 %	21 %	21,4 %
4 year-olds	8,3 %	3 %	2,9 %	55,1 %	24,6 %	28,1 %
5 year-olds	18,9 %	2,8 %	5,3 %	27,5 %	11,8 %	12,9 %
adults	7,2 %	0	0	5,3 %	0,8 %	0

The results show that: i) bilingual children omit clitics not only in Portuguese (as do monolingual Portuguese children), but also in Spanish, and their omission rates in Spanish are higher than the ones we find in Spanish monolinguals, which is consistent with results found in other studies for other languages (Costa, Lobo and Pratas 2015); ii) bilinguals omit more in Portuguese than in Spanish and show an earlier decrease in clitic omission in Spanish, which shows that they distinguish the two systems and support the idea that there is independent development of each system in bilinguals (Genesee 1989; Meisel 1989, 2007; de Houwer 1990, 2005; a.o.); iii)

binomials omit a little bit more in Portuguese than monolingual Portuguese children, which may be due to a developmental effect specific to binomials, following Pirvulescu et al. (2014), and shows that it is not merely a transfer phenomenon but instead it is an option for the form with the least processing costs; iv) binomials distinguish different contexts – they have higher omission rates with accusative clitics in simple sentences in Spanish. Bilingual development is convergent with the target language, but apparently they are a little bit slower in this grammatical area: 5 year-olds already have lower omission rates and the behavior of bilingual adults is similar to the one of monolinguals.