

The Acquisition of Subjects in the Spanish of Simultaneous English-Spanish Bilinguals

Julio Villa-García¹ and Imanol Suárez-Palma²

¹University of Manchester and ²University of Arizona

Using longitudinal corpus data from four English-Spanish bilingual children and one Spanish monolingual child, we submit that Crosslinguistic Influence (CLI) is minimal in the development of null and overt subjects at the initial stages of subject acquisition in Spanish.

The proposal of Crosslinguistic Influence (CLI), advocated by Hulk and Müller (2000) and Müller and Hulk (2001), contends that a construction is predicted to be vulnerable to CLI if (a) the phenomenon in question belongs to the syntax-pragmatics interface and if (b) there is some degree of surface overlap between the construction in question in the two languages. Therefore, null and overt subjects in pro-drop languages like Spanish are deemed to be susceptible to CLI, since their distribution is regulated by syntactic, lexico-semantic, and pragmatic factors. Thus, a number of studies have actually investigated the issue of CLI in the acquisition of subjects in English-Spanish simultaneous bilinguals (Paradis and Navarro, 2003; Licerias, Fernández Fuentes, and Pérez-Tattam, 2008; Licerias, Fernández Fuentes, and Alba de la Fuente, 2012; and Silva-Corvalán, 2014). In this talk, we supplement the existing studies in a novel way by:

- (i) examining a larger number of English-Spanish bilingual children,
- (ii) focusing on the pragmatic contexts in which early null and overt subjects occur, and
- (iii) investigating the timeline of acquisition of preverbal (SV) and postverbal (VS) subjects.

Our results indicate that inter-language interference or CLI barely affects the development of subjects in Spanish at the initial stages, namely at the outset of null and overt subjects. More specifically, this study provides acquisitional evidence for a number of claims (cf. I-III).

I. Our English-Spanish bilingual cohort patterns with their Spanish-acquiring monolingual peer in that both groups display comparable acquisitional trajectories of null and overt subjects, as shown in Table 1. In some cases, we find a statistically significant gap between the onset age of null and overt subjects. Much like in the case of monolinguals, bilingual children's null subjects are abundant at the initial stages (cf. Grinstead, 1998 et seq.), unlike children acquiring English. The proportions of early null subjects for the bilinguals are in fact comparable to those of the monolingual control, with null subjects outnumbering overt ones (cf. Table 2/Figure 1).

II. Since CLI is intimately associated with the intersection between syntax and pragmatics (cf. a), we analyze the pragmatic felicitousness of all of the children's subjects in the files considered (cf. ii). Our examination of the contexts in which the earliest null-subject sentences begin reveals that all the children of this study use null subjects in a target-like fashion in their naturalistic speech from the start: their covert subjects have a salient referent in the preceding discourse. This is indicative that there are no CLI effects from English, at least at the outset.

III. In much the same way as monolinguals (cf. Irene; see also Grinstead, 1998 et seq. and Villa-García, 2011), bilinguals start to employ preverbal and postverbal subjects concurrently and with not significant onset intervals between the emergence points of the two types of subject by Binomial Test (Snyder, 2007) (cf. Table 3). This is again suggestive that CLI is not operative in the development of subjects in the early speech of these children: if English dictated the word order in Spanish, we would expect SV to emerge earlier and to prevail in the children's speech, contrary to fact. Indeed, in their spontaneous speech, the bilingual children and the monolingual child of this study produce extremely high rates of appropriate preverbal and postverbal subjects from the first instances of such constructions, adhering to the syntactic, lexico-semantic, and information structural considerations underlying their use (e.g., transitive/unaccusative, old/new information) (cf. Ortega-Santos, 2016; *inter alia*).

Overall, the naturalistic data of the four bilingual children of this study show that in terms of the development of subjects, the children's Spanish follows a path of acquisition akin to that of monolinguals, thus pointing to the absence of CLI with regard to subject acquisition.

Table 1. Corpora and Onset Age of First-of-Repeated Uses of Null and Overt Subjects in the Children's Spanish

Child	Bilingual (B)/ monolingual (M)	Corpus	Onset Age of Null Subjects	Onset Age of Overt Subjects	Binomial Test
Irene (♀)	Monolingual (M) (Peninsular Sp.)	Llinàs-Grau/Ojea (CHILDES, MacWhinney, 2000) (Ojea, 1997)	01;07,05 (MLU _w : 1.72)	01;07,22 (MLU _w : 2.05)	$p < 0.001$
Carla (♀)	Bilingual (B) (Eng.- Peninsular Sp.)	Pérez-Bazán (CHILDES) (Pérez-Bazán, 2002)	02;00,00 (MLU _w : 1.71)	02;03,00 (MLU _w : 3.33)	$p < 0.001$
Manuela (♀)	Bilingual (B) (Eng.-Cuban Sp.)	Deuchar (CHILDES) (Deuchar and Quay, 2000)	01;09,05 (MLU _w : 1.25)	01;11,07 (MLU _w : 1.34)	$p = 0.0735$
Leo (♂)	Bilingual (B) (Eng.- Peninsular Sp.)	FerFuLice (CHILDES) (Licerias et al., 2008)	01;10,22 (MLU _w : 1.35)	02;04,09 (MLU _w : 1.44)	$p < 0.001$
Simon (♂)			02;00,16 (MLU _w : 1.3)	02;01,28 (MLU _w : 1.27)	$p = 0.120$

Table 2 and Figure 1. Percentage of Early Null and Overt Subjects in the Children's Developing Spanish

Child	% of null subjects	% of overt subjects
Irene (M)	71.78 (# = 295)	28.22 (# = 116)
Carla (B)	54.76 (# = 92)	45.24 (# = 76)
Manuela (B)	55.77 (# = 29)	44.23 (# = 23)
Leo (B)	75.51 (# = 37)	24.49 (# = 12)
Simon (B)	63.16 (# = 24)	36.84 (# = 14)

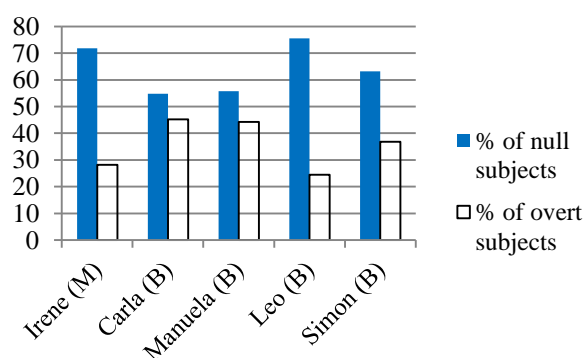


Table 3. Onset Age of First-of-Repeated Uses of Preverbal and Postverbal Subjects in Spanish

Child	Onset Age of Preverbal Subjects (SV, SVO)	Onset Age of Postverbal Subjects (VS, VOS)	Binomial Test (when SV/VN first occur in different transcripts)
Irene (M)	1;07,22 (MLU _w : 2.05)	1;07,22 (MLU _w : 2.05)	(same transcript)
Carla (B)	02;03,00 (MLU _w : 3.333)	02;03,00 (MLU _w : 3.333)	(same transcript)
Manuela (B)	01;11,07 (MLU _w : 1.335)	01;11,07 (MLU _w : 1.335)	(same transcript)
Leo (B)	02;05,00 (MLU _w : 1.53)	02;04,09 (MLU _w : 1.55)	$p = 0.127$
Simon (B)	02;05,00 (MLU _w : 1.34)	02;01,28 (MLU _w : 1.27)	$p = 0.250$

Selected references

Grinstead, J. (1998). *Subjects, sentential negation and imperatives in child Spanish and Catalan*. Doctoral dissertation: University of California Los Angeles. // Licerias, J. M., Fernández Fuertes, R. & Pérez-Tattam, R. (2008). Null and overt subjects in the developing grammars (L1 English/L1 Spanish) of two bilingual twins. In Gaya, A. B. (Ed.), *A portrait of the young in the new multilingual Spain* // Paradis, J., & Navarro, S. (2003). Subject realization and Crosslinguistic interference in the bilingual acquisition of Spanish and English: What is the role of the input? *Journal of Child Language*, 30(2), 371-393. // Ortega-Santos, I. (2016). *Focus-related Operations at the Right Edge in Spanish: Subjects and Ellipsis*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. // Silva-Corvalán, C. (2014). *Bilingual language acquisition: Spanish and English in the first six years*. New York: Cambridge University Press. // Villa-García, J. (2011). Acquisitional Evidence Bearing on the Account of Preverbal and Postverbal Subjects in Spanish. In Ortiz, L. (Ed.), *Selected Proceedings of the 13th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*.