# Cross-linguistic prosodic influence in bilingual language acquisition: a qualitative case study

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on cross-linguistic prosodic influence in bilingual language acquisition, based on a case study of one French-Spanish bilingual child of whom 3,340 utterances between 2;0 and 3;0 years of age are analyzed. Numerous studies on bilingual acquisition of phonology have uncovered interaction between the two linguistic systems involved; this study aims at motivating the direction of influence by language-specific prosodic properties. Results for lexical stress, prosodic phrasing and intonation indicate possible negative transfer from French onto Spanish, which is explained by prosodic variability and its consequences for acquisition. Even though these findings are only exploratory, they are intended to serve as a predictor for other language combinations in multilingual language acquisition. Other (extra-linguistic) types of influence like language dominance and methodological issues are discussed.

**Keywords**: bilingual language acquisition, negative transfer, prosody, French, Spanish.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Bilingual language acquisition is defined as the simultaneous acquisition of two languages from birth ([16]). The relevant principle in the case study is the "one person – one language" method ([19]), frequently employed in Europe and elsewhere, according to which both parents speak different native languages (L1) and each speaks his/her L1 with the child who is then bilingual (2L1).

The theoretic debate in bilingual language acquisition research is whether the child starts off with one single linguistic system, much like in monolingual language acquisition, or whether both languages are separated from early on. The former perspective is the traditional analysis (e.g. [23]), while the latter is by now the standard assumption, though mainly based on studies of (morpho-)syntactic phenomena (e.g. [15]). Successful separation of two notwithstanding, bilingual systems language acquisition must not be equated with doubly monolingual language acquisition because there is influence between the two linguistic systems involved, such as acceleration, delay or transfer (e.g. [18]; [12] for influence in phonology).

An important aspect in multilingualism is language dominance as bilinguals may not be balanced across their languages ([2]). Dominance is measured in terms of MLU (mean length of utterances in words/morphemes), upper bound, number of utterances or development of noun and verb types ([16]). Studies on the acquisition of syntactic phenomena have shown that dominance has an effect on mixing but is independent of the aforementioned types of influence (e.g. [9]).

## 2. BILINGUAL ACQUISITION OF PHONOLOGY

Like research on syntax, work on bilingual acquisition of phonology has established that children are able to acquire and to separate two different phonologies from early on. On the segmental level, [7] shows in three German-Spanish bilinguals that acquisition is delayed with respect to the more marked vowel system of German. Voice onset time (VOT) was investigated by [8] for the same language combination in four bilinguals, finding influence in some children (delay in German, bidirectional transfer). For prosodic criteria, [14] describe delay for two German-Spanish bilinguals regarding the acquisition of pitch accents when compared to monolinguals, and [13] find evidence of interaction between German and Spanish in the intonation of yes/no questions in two bilinguals. Finally, [17] investigates 17 English-French bilinguals and their syllable truncation in quadrisyllabic words as a function of lexical stress; she also finds interaction in the way that French influences the acquisition of English which is explained by the fact that English allows for greater variability (cf. section 3).

As this brief literature survey shows, the beststudied language combination in bilingual acquisition of phonology is German-Spanish. Phonologically, this is a very interesting combination as there are many segmental and suprasegmental differences between the two languages, which stem from different linguistic groups within the Indo-European family, the Germanic and the Romance one. The same pertains to Paradis's [17] French-English bilingual subjects. The present case study takes two Romance languages with a high degree of genealogic relationship into account. This language combination is particularly interesting because despite their close relation, French differs highly from all other Romance varieties when it comes to the prosodic parameters studied here.

As a consequence from detailed phonological analyses, all studies (perhaps with the exception of [17]) can only analyze a very low number of individuals. Importantly though, the studies contrast the findings with monolingual control data, either collected for the same purposes or taken from the relevant literature.

### 3. CONTRASTING FRENCH AND SPANISH PROSODY

Unlike Spanish or German, French does not exhibit lexical stress, i.e. in groups of words stress invariably falls on the final full (non-schwa) syllable (the same pertains to single words produced in isolation). The basic prosodic domain is the Phonological Phrase or the Accentual Phrase (PP/AP; le mauvais garcon 'the bad boy') with an obligatory final accent and an optional initial accent, typically on the first syllable of the first content word (mau-). The next unit is the intermediate phrase (ip), which corresponds to particular syntactic constructions like dislocations or enumerations, in which the AP- and the ip-final accents fall together. Finally, the Intonational Phrase (IP) generally coincides with sentences/utterances. In addition to the IP-final accent, IPs in French are marked by final lengthening and may be followed by a pause ([IP[APLe mauvais garcon] [APment à sa <u>MÈRE</u>]]. 'The bad boy lies to his mother.'; e.g. [6], for a more general overview of the prosodic hierarchy cf. [21]).

In contrast, Spanish displays variable word stress. Even though 80% of the Spanish lexicon carry penultimate (trochaic) stress ([10]), it is not regular. Lexical stress in Spanish also follows morphophonological tendencies (<u>término</u> '(the) end'/ter<u>mino</u> 'I end'/terminó</u> 'he ended'). In Spanish ips and IPs, nuclear pitch accents are of major importance. These accents are most prominent and are typically found on the last lexical item in neutral contexts ([ $_{\rm IP}Quiero$ una gaLLEta.] 'I want a cookie.'). French and Spanish therefore display differences not only with respect to lexical stress, but also with respect to the distribution of accent types. Stress and prosodic phrasing are generally less variable in French when compared to Spanish.

Consequently, the intonational repertoire in terms of pitch accents and nuclear configurations, which express certain pragmatic contexts like broad and narrow focus constructions etc., is much larger in Spanish than in French ([3], [5]). While there are six basic nuclear pitch configurations in French, Spanish has 19. What must be borne in mind, however, is that there is much dialectal variation when intonation is considered and that prosodic labels are not categorical but dynamic. Lexical stress, phrasing and intonation are more variable in Spanish when compared to French, where they may therefore be possibly relatively more easily acquired.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

Research has established that (i) bilingual children separate their phonological systems from early on and that (ii) there is phonological interaction during the process of language acquisition (cf. sections 1, 2). The present study aims at finding causes for the direction of prosodic influence in a given language combination. In line with [17], it is expected that influence will be in the direction from French, the less variable system with respect to stress, phrasing and intonation, onto Spanish with relatively more prosodic variability. The basic assumption underlying these expectations is that variable systems should be more difficult to acquire than less variable systems within one individual. The argumentation of [7] and [10] in terms of complexity and markedness makes the same predictions. Notwithstanding these generalities, individual factors will also play a role in the acquisitional process, for example language dominance, which is not analyzed in detail here.

The child investigated was recorded every fortnight in a natural interactive setting for approximately half an hour in each language. The mother is Spanish-speaking, and the father is Frenchspeaking; the family resides in France. Data were extracted and prosodically coded with *Praat* ([1]) and ToBI (Tones and Break Indices; [3], [5]). Table (1) presents the recordings analyzed thus far, including information on age, MLU (mean length of utterance in morphemes) and the total number of utterances:

French			Spanish			total
age	MLU	utt	age	MLU	utt	utt
2;2,15	3.29	145	2;2,0	2.98	406	
2;3,6	3.30	332	2;3,29	3.31	288	
2;8,1	4.26	292	2;7,25	3.90	503	
2;11,19	7.34	196	3;0,13	4.41	645	
3;1,24	5.63	195	3;1,23	4.51	338	
total		1160	total		2180	3340

Table 1: Data

The MLU shows that the child is slightly dominant in French. Since this paper presents first exploratory and cursory results of only one case study, no statistical measures have been implemented yet.

#### 5. RESULTS

In what follows, it is argued that differences in the phonological systems influence acquisition in the expected direction from French onto Spanish. However, these examples are few as they present exceptions to the rule. The results are not quantified and statistically analyzed yet and therefore need to be interpreted with caution.

### 5.1. Lexical stress

Variable lexical stress seems to pose a problem even within one language and within one lexical type. Examples (1-6) show that target-like iambs in Spanish are produced as unmarked trochees in four out of six cases in one recording (3;1,23):

- (1) Ese es tu café. 'This is your coffee.'
- (2) Ese es el café. 'This is the coffee.'
- (3) Un café. 'A coffee.'
- (4) Hay algo del café. 'Here is some coffee.'
- (5) Mh, café. 'Mh, coffee.'
- (6) *Quieres la cuchara aquí como tomas el café?*

'Do you want the spoon here to drink coffee?' This result is corroborated by other studies ([11] on Spanish-German bilingualism) and seems to be independent of the second language involved. In fact, French as a language with invariable final stress should facilitate the acquisition of iambs.

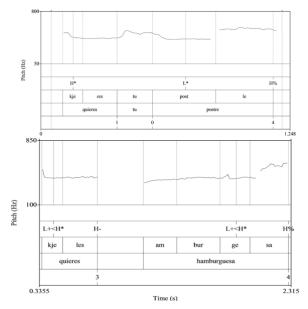
A possibly negative influence from French onto Spanish can be observed at and above the word level in ips and IPs, which yields ungrammatical structures in Spanish:

- (7) en una camiseta 'on a t-shirt' (2;2,0)
- (8) *vídeo* 'video' (2;2,0)
- (9) *El señor está mirando à <u>MI</u>.* 'The man is watching me.' (2;2,0)
- (10) *El señor no ha<u>BLA</u>*. 'The man does not talk.' (2;2,0)

In examples (7-10), final syllables are stressed, which cannot be explained by a trochaic bias along the lines of examples (1-6). Rather, a French phrase-final accent as a truly negative transfer must be concluded from these data.

#### 5.2. Prosodic phrasing

The Spanish data display inconsistencies with respect to intermediate phrasing which may be explained by negative transfer from French where prosodic boundaries are found in larger units than words (cf. section 3). Interestingly, unexpected ip boundaries seem to interact with other grammatical domains: They frequently appear where determiners are omitted illegitimately and may also be related to noun length and subject position: **Figure 1**: Grammatical prosodic phrasing (top) vs ungrammatical ip boundary and noun length (bottom)



The top part of Figure (1) displays the expected intonational contour of the absolute question Quieres tu postre? 'Do vou want vour dessert?' without any unexpected phrasing. The bottom part, by contrast, illustrates the syntactically identical structure Quieres hamburguesa? 'Do you want (your) hamburger?' where the determiner is missing and where phrasing is target-deviant: The verb is followed by an intermediate H- boundary tone and a pause, which is unexpected in adult Spanish in this specific context. The H- tone appears in specific syntactic constructions, e.g. appositions, enumerations and long subjects or in hesitations. Presumably, one reason for this particular prosodic phrasing is the length of the noun in terms of number of syllables. Ouadrisyllabic items are rare in the Spanish lexicon.

**Figure 2**: Grammatical prosodic phrasing (top) vs ungrammatical ip boundary and post-verbal subject (bottom)

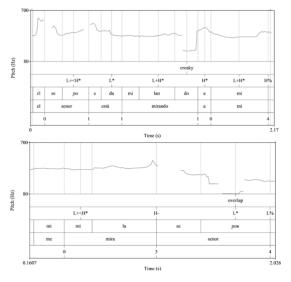


Figure (2) shows in which way subject position may influence prosodic phrasing and determiner omission. Spanish, in contrast to French, allows for the postverbal subject position, but this position is marked and restricted to specific pragmatic contexts. In the top part of Figure (2), where the subject in the example utterance *El señor está mirando a mí* 'The man is watching me' is unmarked, prosodic phrasing is realized according to Spanish grammar. The bottom part exemplifies the post-verbal variant *Me mira señor* '(The) man is watching me' with an unexpected intermediate H- boundary tone and determiner omission.

## 5.3. Intonation

configurations Considering nuclear pitch as language-specific exponents of intonational grammar, the direction of influence from French onto Spanish is further substantiated. To start off with, narrow focus constructions have been analyzed from two recordings per language because these pragmatic contexts differ with respect to nuclear pitch configurations in French and Spanish. These very preliminary data yield the result that in French, the child consistently produces the expected L\* L% and H\* H% configurations (100.0%, n=14), while in Spanish, only half of the realizations correspond to the grammatical L+H\* L% pattern (50.0%, n=6). The second half is produced by other configurations, of which 16.7% (n=2) show the French template:

(11) Eso es pasta, salsa de pasta.

H\* H%

'This is pasta, pasta sauce.' (3;1,23)

Nonetheless, the L+H\* L% pattern is only the most typical structure to express narrow focus in Spanish. There are other strategies which need to be taken into account (e.g. [20]). Overall, these facts are in line with more variable forms in Spanish when compared to French.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, all results – including lexical stress, prosodic phrasing and intonation in nuclear pitch configurations of narrow focus constructions – are indicative of the fact that the relatively more invariable system (French) influences the relatively more variable system (Spanish) in bilingual language acquisition. The stable word- and phrase-final accent in French can be found in Spanish productions of the child (the possibility of language-internal variability as a source of target-deviant accentuation was also shown). Ungrammatical prosodic phrasing in Spanish was illustrated in connection with determiner omission and further grammatical criteria such as noun length and subject position. Negative transfer from French can be induced in the examples because the intermediate H- boundary tone is a typical means of phrase-final accentuation in French, a language which is commonly considered not to have lexical stress. Finally, intonation in nuclear pitch configurations show stability in the French productions and possibly negative transfer from French in the Spanish productions.

Since the child investigated is French-dominant, one may argue that this is the cause of influence rather than differences in the two systems involved. For the present case study, the results may emerge from the twin effect of French dominance and French prosodic stability, jointly leading to negative transfer onto Spanish. However, dominance should be considered with caution because it may not be relevant for influence (cf. section 1). In fact, when a different measure is defined, for example number of utterances, the child would be Spanish-dominant (cf. Tab. 1). In order to neatly separate language dominance and systematic differences as two distinct causes of influence from each other, further language combinations and dominance relations need to be investigated. After all, bidirectional influence is possible in bilingualism (e.g. [22]).

Even though these conclusions seem to meet the expectations, they must be considered as provisional. First, the data analyzed so far need to be related to results of monolingual language acquisition (cf. section 2). Only when the two acquisitional scenarios differ from each other, the effects found in Spanish may be attributed to the French phonological system in the bilingual setting. Second, data are also too scanty to draw reliable conclusions yet. The data base needs to be enlarged and the results must be systematically quantified to confirm the hypothesized direction of influence. A methodological flaw of the study of negative transfer is that tokens are exceptions and therefore necessarily small in number, which makes statistical analyses difficult or unnecessary and, as a consequence, interpretations possible on a qualitative basis only.

Taking these conclusions as a blueprint for further language combinations in multilingualism – and keeping in mind all reservations with respect to interpretability of the data –, the results allow for generalizations based on relative prosodic variability of the linguistic systems in comparison to each other. The combination Spanish-German, for instance, will lead to different results when arguing with systematic differences for the prosodic criteria presented here because in German, just like in Spanish, lexical stress is variable and the intonational repertoire is large (e.g. [4]). These kinds of predictors need to be worked out and refined in future research.

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