

The syntax-discourse interface in bilingual and monolingual speakers: crosslinguistic influence or default strategies?

Recent research on pronominal usage in three different bilingual populations – L1 English advanced speakers of L2 Italian and L2 Spanish, English-Italian and English-Spanish bilingual children, and native speakers of Italian and Spanish under attrition from English - shows that all these speakers overuse overt pronouns in Italian or Spanish in contexts in which monolinguals would use a null pronoun (Filiaci 2003; Montrul, in press; Otheguy & Zentella 2002; Paradis & Navarro 2003; Serratrice et al, in press; Sorace 2003; Tsimpli et al, in press). The effects may be visible both in production and in comprehension: so for example Italian-English bilinguals may use a ‘redundant’ pronoun (as in 1b) where monolinguals would use a null pronoun; they may also understand that the pronoun LUI in (2) refers to the subject ‘Gianni’, whereas monolinguals would instead interpret it as coreferential with ‘his friend’ or with an extralinguistic referent).

- (1) a. Perchè Maria è andata via?
Why did Maria leave?
b. (perchè) LEI ha trovato un altro lavoro.
Because she has found another job
- (2) Gianni saluta il suo amico mentre LUI attraversa la strada
Gianni greets his friend while he is crossing the street

There is no reverse effect within the null subject language, i.e. no tendency to use null subject pronouns in contexts requiring an overt subject. Moreover, there is no effect of the null subject language on English, i.e. no instances of dropped pronouns: so the influence is unidirectional. In all these bilingual groups, other aspects of the null subject grammar which are more narrowly ‘syntactic’ are NOT affected by English: the effects seem to be confined to areas of ‘interface’ between syntax and discourse (Müller & Hulk 2001), which require both the correct feature setting that makes certain options possible and the mastery of the pragmatic conditions governing the use of these options.

These facts raise two questions. First, is this the result of some representational deficit (e.g. feature underspecification or divergence), or is it rather a processing problem with the on-line coordination of multiple knowledge sources? Second, is crosslinguistic influence (in this case from English) the only cause? This hypothesis might seem plausible because English, in contrast to Italian/Spanish, instantiates a more ‘economical’ grammar with no interface conditions on subject use. However, the phenomenon of overextension of overt subjects is also found in older monolingual Italian children (Serratrice 2004) and Spanish learners of Italian (Bini 1993), for whom knowledge of English is not a factor. These data indicate that there may be some inherent difficulty with the syntax-discourse interface, which may be resolved by resorting to overt subjects as a default strategy. Crosslinguistic influence may therefore be a reinforcing factor, rather than the main cause of this phenomenon.