Bilingual Children: Gender Disagreement in Spanish

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BACKGROUND

• Sequential (Spanish-English) bilingual children begin to learn a second language after their native (first) language.
• School-age bilingual children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) tend to demonstrate considerable difficulty with definite article use (gender disagreement and omission) in Spanish relative to bilingual children who are typically developing.
• However, verb marking is relatively unaffected in bilingual children with and without language impairments.
• Limited evidence is available on the patterns of article use and verb marking of bilingual preschoolers.
• Spanish requires gender marking and agreement.
• Article + noun phrases are marked for gender agreement
  - C El perro C The[masculine] dog[masculine]
  - C La rana C The[feminine] frog[feminine]

PURPOSE

• Monolingual Spanish speaking preschool-children demonstrate typical developmental morphological errors.
• Bilingual preschool-children also demonstrate typical developmental morphological errors.
• The proposed study will examine the development of gender disagreement over 1 academic year (Fall and Spring) in definite articles relative to other morphosyntactic errors in preschool-age bilingual (Spanish-English) children.
• Gender disagreement
  - C La [E:el] perro C The[feminine] dog[masculine]
  - C E[E:la] rana C The[masculine] frog[feminine]
  - C La[E:los] perros C The[feminine] dogs[masculine]
  - C Los[E:las] ranas C The[masculine] frogs[masculine]
• Article omission
  - C Corrió "el perro" C The dog ran
  - C Brincó "la rana" C The frog jumped
  - C Se rieron "los animales" C The animals laughed
  - C Saltaron "las abejas" C The bees got out
• Verb marking errors
  - C Y se caer[E:cae] . C And then he fall[E:feil].
• Three research aims were investigated across 2 semesters:
  1. What is the proportion of gender disagreement errors on definite singular and plural articles?
  2. What is the proportion of omission errors on definite singular and plural articles?
  3. What is the proportion of verb marking relative to article use errors (gender disagreement; omission)?

METHODS

• Data were collected from 36 Spanish-English bilingual preschool-age children in Fall and Spring, who were enrolled in a twogeneration (parent-child) school readiness program.
• The program fostered parenting knowledge and skills aiming to directly impact the child’s physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.
• Four wordless picture story books (Mayer 1969; 1974; 1975a; 1975b) were used to elicit narrative language samples.
• Language samples were transcribed in Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT) 16 by trained graduate clinicians and coded for morphological errors [E:target], as well as ‘omissions’.
• The following errors were calculated over 1 academic year, including language sampling during the Fall and Spring semesters:
  - Gender disagreement errors on definite articles
  - Definite article omissions
  - Morphological errors with verb marking

RESULTS

• Article Gender Marking: Substitution Errors
  - The highest % of gender disagreement errors occurred with the incorrect marking of masculine definite articles, particularly the definite plural “los” (mean = 20%)
  - The % of gender disagreement errors increased by 17.5% over 1 year for the masculine definite plural article
  - The % of gender disagreement with feminine definite articles was lower (13.5%) relative to the incorrect marking of their masculine counterparts (13.5%)

• Article Omission
  - Errors with verb marking use particularly affected /-ar/ verbs
  - Types of morphological errors were consistent over 1 academic year (Fall and Spring)
  - Children’s morphology and syntax may be influenced by the environmental input received at home and at school

DISCUSSION

• Morphological errors occur developmentally in bilingual Spanish-English children
• Gender disagreement errors were consistently higher for the masculine singular definite article (“los”) over 1 academic year
• German disagreement errors with the masculine singular definite article were consistent with prior work on bilinguals with SLI
• Articulation omission for female singular and plural definite articles were inconsistent
• Errors with verb marking use particularly affected /-ar/ verbs
• Types of morphological errors were consistent over 1 academic year (Fall and Spring)
• Children’s morphology and syntax may be influenced by the environmental input received at home and at school

FUTURE QUESTIONS

• How may the Spanish morphological errors of this cohort of children change over 2 or 3 academic years?
• How may the Spanish morphological errors change once the children begin school in different programs of language instruction?
• Will article omission decrease as children are exposed to academic vocabulary?
• Will morphological errors in Spanish increase as children start being exposed to more English in school and everyday life?