Spanish/Portuguese bilingual null-subject grammars on the Brazil-Argentina borders in Misiones: preliminary evidence

This work focuses on Spanish/Portuguese bilingual null-subject grammars on the Brazil-Argentina border contexts of Misiones. I aim to show what monolingual and non-monolingual language acquisition studies (Hyams, 1986; White, 1989; Silva-Corvalán, 2014; Polinsky, 2018) can inform us about this contact situation. The hypotheses are theoretically drawn based on Markedness and the Subset Principle (Berwick, 1985; Wexler and Manzini, 1987) operating in a parametric hierarchy (Roberts, 2019). Preliminary empirical evidence comes from spontaneous production and experimental comprehensive data. The basic idea is that markedness can explain relevant issues concerning cross-linguistic influence in contact-based acquisition.

According to Roberts (2019), Spanish is a consistent null-subject language (CNSL) while BP is a partial null-subject language (PNSL). One of the distinguishing properties found in BP is the existence of 3Sg null subjects with indefinite/arbitrary interpretation (1), which is ungrammatical in Spanish (2):

1. a. (Eu) conheço o João. Ele vende sorvete na praia. [BP]
   (I) know.1SG the João he sell.3SG ice cream on-the beach
   'I know João. He sells ice cream on the beach.'
   b. pro_{arb} Vende sorvete na praia.
   one sell.3SG ice cream on-the beach
   'One sells ice cream on the beach.'

2. a. Conozco a Juan. Vende helado en la playa. [Spanish]
   know.1SG DOM Juan sell.3SG ice cream on the beach
   'I know Juan. He sells ice cream on the beach.'
   b. Se/*pro_{arb} vende helado en la playa.
   CL.ACC.3SG sell.3SG ice cream on the beach
   'One sells ice cream on the beach.'

In Roberts' parameter hierarchy (2019: 205), PNSL represents a superset (i.e., the marked option) as compared to CNSL (i.e., the unmarked option). He accounts for the differences by focusing on the presence of a D(efinite)-feature on T: while *pro* acts like a definite pronoun in the latter, it is inherently indefinite in the former.

The implication of markedness for language acquisition is that the marked option would take longer to be acquired through positive evidence. Several studies on English acquisition postulate that acquisition appears to start with the omission of pronominal subjects. In the case of bilingualism (L2, 2L1, heritage language), the marked option may be a locus of cross-linguistic influence in Spanish/English pairs.

Based on this theoretical assumption and well-known studies, Author (2022) makes the following predictions for BP_{L1}-$Spanish_{L2}$ and $Spanish_{L1}$-BP_{L2}, respectively:

i. BP speakers learning Spanish are expected to negatively transfer null subject properties from their L1 to their L2, but also demonstrate knowledge of consistent null subject properties earlier, as Spanish is underspecified as the smallest grammar.
ii. Spanish speakers learning BP are expected to positively transfer null subject properties from their L1 to their L2, but also take more time in properly acquiring partial null subject properties.

The experimental study results presented by Author (2024; in press) suggest directionality effects in L2: BP speakers learning Spanish as L2 exhibit comprehension of definite property of 3Sg NS at lower stages but struggle to block their L1 grammar at higher stages. Differently, Spanish speakers learning BP seem to take

more time to exhibit comprehension of indefinite property of 3Sg NS and make some progress blocking their L1 grammar at higher stages. These results indicate support in favor of the predictions (i) and (ii).

If markedness has an impact on language acquisition, some evidence is expected to be found from language contact situations, where bilingualism takes place, in addition to other development factors (e.g., amount of exposure, onset age of acquisition) (Tsimpli, 2014). As it has been widely reported by Lipski (2018, among others), the Brazil-Argentina borders in Misiones exhibit different types of bilingualism (L2, 2L1, heritage language), including L1 Portuguese speakers.

The first evidence of markedness affecting acquisition in language contact situation comes from data of non-schooling varieties of Portuguese/Spanish (that is called 'Brazilian/Argentine') bilingual speakers living in rural areas. As we can see in the following data produced spontaneously by an adult Brazilian-Argentine speaker living far from the urban center of Comandante Andresito, indefinite 3Sg NS is part of both grammars:

3. a. Quando cheguemos lá **vende** (café). [Portuguese ('Brazilian')]
   when arrive.1PL there sell.3SG coffee
   'When we arrive there one sells coffee.'
   b. **Tiene** que tenerle paciencia [Spanish ('Argentine')]
   have.3SG that have.INF-CL.3SG.DAT patient
   'One must be patient with him.'

The second evidence is provided by an ongoing experimental study in which Brazilian/Argentine bilinguals interpret 3Sg NS as both definite and indefinite in Portuguese. By hypothesis, markedness is supposed to have affected language contact in the beginning (i.e., from the first contact generation of Portuguese speakers in Misiones).

This work contributes to approaches to language contact and change by shedding light on non-monolingual acquisition of Portuguese/Spanish in the context of Brazil-Argentina borderlands.

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