

Determiners at the phonology-syntax interface in bilingual first language acquisition of Romance languages

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This contribution relates to the question of cross-linguistic differences in the rate and route of (bilingual) acquisition of determiners (D) at the phonology-syntax interface based on French, Spanish and Italian data. Despite their typological proximity, these Romance languages differ with respect to D form and use. In French, grammatical D omissions are extremely rare and limited to non-argumental positions and idiomatic expressions (Prévost 2009). Spanish and Italian show regular D omissions with mass nouns and plural nouns with a generic reading. D omissions are illicit in subject position (Montrul 2004, Belletti/Guasti 2015). Apart from syntactic differences, studies on monolingual language acquisition underline the importance of language-specific phonology in D acquisition, especially the prosodic structure of nouns in terms of length and lexical stress. While French nouns are mostly monosyllabic or disyllabic (Demuth/Johnson 2003), Spanish and especially Italian exhibit more disyllabic and trisyllabic nouns (Lleó 2006, Guasti et al. 2008). Another important difference between French on the one hand and Spanish and Italian on the other is that the latter possess (variable but preferably penultimate) lexical stress while French displays a post-lexical phrasal accent which is invariably final (Delais-Roussarie et al. 2015, Gili Fivela et al. 2015, Hualde/Prieto 2015).

In early language acquisition, target-deviant omission of determiners is very common. Some language-specific differences notwithstanding, monolingual and bilingual children acquiring French, Spanish and Italian omit more than 50% of determiners before two years of age. At the same time, D placeholders and noun truncations are observed. During the third year of life, D omissions drop drastically in favor of D realizations (e.g. Kupisch 2007, Demuth/Tremblay 2008 on French; Lleó 2001, Demuth et al. 2012 on Spanish; Kupisch 2007, Guasti et al. 2008 on Italian). Demuth et al. (2012: 21) argue that the relative length of nouns in Spanish favors early acquisition of higher levels of prosodic structure when compared to French, fostering the prosodification of determiners. Based on the phonological similarities as described above, the same should pertain to Italian (in contrast to French). Moreover, the high frequency of multisyllabic nouns corresponding to the penultimate template of Spanish (or Italian) also facilitates early D prosodification within a prosodic foot (Lleó/Demuth 1999). Summing up, D acquisition in French should be mostly syntactically motivated while prosody should be at play primarily in Spanish and Italian.

The phonological and syntactic differences with respect to D acquisition in Romance give rise to the question of how simultaneously bilingual children acquire D. Even though bilinguals are generally said to separate their languages from early on, there may be interaction between them, e.g. acceleration, delay or transfer effects (Paradis/Genesee 1996, Lleó 2016), which are explained by structural ambiguity (Müller/Hulk 2001) or complexity/markedness (Lleó 2002) as well as by language dominance (Kupisch/Bernardini 2007). Longitudinal data taken from the *Wuppertal Bilingualism Group* database (assembled by Prof. Dr. Natascha Müller) is analyzed including a French-Spanish child (dominant in French) and two French-Italian children (one French-dominant, one Italian-dominant). Importantly, these children acquire a “syntactic” language (French) next to a “phonological” language (Spanish or Italian). Preliminary results of the French-Spanish case study from 2;2,0-3;1,24 based on 3340 child utterances and 1312 NPs reveal significantly more target-deviant D omissions in Spanish (6.3%) than in French (1.9%; $p < .001$). These results point to a separation of languages and to an acceleration effect in French because monolingual children acquiring French display higher D omission rates at comparable acquisitional stages (Prévost 2009). A possible phonological explanation for these results is a less complex/marked system of French (monosyllabicity, invariable phrasal accent). Another explanation is language dominance.

For an evaluation of these possibilities, ongoing research analyzes data from two French-Italian children. If language-specific structure is the decisive cause of influence in bilingual language acquisition, the results for both children should principally mirror those obtained for the French-Spanish child. However, if dominance is crucial, then the French-Italian child should reflect the documented acceleration effect in French while the Italian-dominant child should not. In order to take into account the role of structural ambiguity, D omissions of a Spanish-Italian child, i.e. two “phonological” languages with comparable prosodic systems regarding noun length and accent, are to be investigated in a follow-up study.

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