

Knowledge of null subjects in heritage Spanish bilinguals in a Spanish immersion school

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Heritage speakers (HSs) show distinct developmental patterns and greater variability than monolinguals and non-heritage bilinguals (Montrul, 2016) in their production of overt/null subjects (Austin et al., 2017), which by virtue of being at the syntax/pragmatics interface are susceptible to developmental instability and cross-linguistic influence (e.g. Müller & Hulk, 2000; Rothman, 2009). This study explores whether differences in language dominance shape the acquisition of null subjects in Spanish and English in heritage bilingual children attending immersion schools in the U.S. with regard to the pragmatic condition of continuous vs. discontinuous topics (CTs, DTs). Null subjects are expected with CTs (1a) and overt subjects with DTs (1b) (Belletti et al. 2007).

(1) a. Dora ve al búho, después juega en el bosque.

Dora_i looks ACC the owl, afterwards plays_i in the forest

'Dora_i looks at the owl, afterwards she_i plays in the forest'

b. Dora toca al unicornio, después ella juega con sus juguetes.

Dora_i touches ACC the unicorn, afterwards she_j plays with her toys.

'Dora_i touches the unicorn, afterwards she_j plays with her toys'

Eighteen Spanish-English heritage bilingual children in the U.S. (ages 4-6) attending a Spanish immersion school completed a modified version of the BESA proficiency test in both languages and an acceptability judgement task (AJT) in Spanish that tested null/overt subjects with CTs and DTs along with ungrammatical distractors testing number agreement in the determiner phrase (2).

(2) Distractor testing number agreement within the DP:

*Dora está en la playa, después toma un chocolate calientes

Dora is at the beach, later drinks a chocolate.SG hot.PL

'Dora is at the beach, after that she drinks hot chocolate.'

BESA results revealed that the children had higher levels of morphosyntactic proficiency in English (82%) than Spanish (68%). For the Spanish AJT results, a GLMM showed differences across expected and unexpected conditions (not including

distractors): ($\beta = -.70$, $SE = .35$, $z = -1.97$, $p = .04$), differences between distractors and null continuous topics ($\beta = 1.5$, $SE = .46$, $z = 3.2$, $p = .001$) and between distractors and overt discontinuous topics ($\beta = 1.2$, $SE = 0.4$, $z = -2.8$, $p = .004$). In English there were no differences between conditions or between grammatical/ungrammatical sentences. Results suggest that in Spanish the children demonstrate greater awareness of the pragmatic properties governing the distribution of null and overt subjects than in English, despite showing higher morphosyntactic accuracy in English.

References Austin, J., Sánchez, L., Pérez-Cortes, S. (2017). Null subjects in the early acquisition of English by child heritage speakers of Spanish. *Proceedings of the 44th Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages*. Romance Languages and Linguistic Theory Series. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Belletti, A., Bennati, E. & Sorace, A. (2007) Theoretical and developmental issues in the syntax of subjects: Evidence from near-native Italian. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 25:657– 689. Montrul, S. (2016). *The acquisition of heritage languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Müller, N. & Hulk, A. (2000). Bilingual first language acquisition at the interface between syntax and pragmatics. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 3 (3), 227-244. Rothman, J. (2009) Pragmatic deficits with syntactic consequences?: L2 pronominal subjects and the syntax–pragmatics interface. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41, 951–973.