

Ultimate attainment in bilingual first language acquisition[☆]

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Received 3 June 2013; received in revised form 27 May 2015; accepted 28 May 2015

Available online 5 August 2015

Abstract

Montrul (2008, 2011) has recently argued that heritage languages are acquired incompletely. The present study analyzes longitudinal data of 24 German–Romance and Romance–Romance (French, Italian, Spanish) simultaneous bilingual children until the age of 4 or 5 who have been raised in otherwise monolingual countries where the native language of one parent is not supported by society. In contrast to heritage speakers, the simultaneous bilingual subjects of the present study are exposed to both of their languages at home, i.e. they have native parents of the respective languages. Notwithstanding, these 2L1 children find themselves in a similar situation as heritage speakers since they receive less input in the language which is not supported by society. Less input refers to the number of people who interact with the child in the non-community language and to the hours exposed to the non-community language per day or week.

The present article looks more closely at three grammatical domains that are systematically different in the respective languages of the bilingual child and which can be analyzed as belonging to one of the variation forms according to Uriagereka (2007). He proposes instances of three deeper forms of variation: Core-Parameters, Sub-Case-Parameters and Peripheral Variation. We take the Head-Complement Parameter (OV in German, VO in Romance) as a Core-Parameter. As a Sub-Case-Parameter we use the Null-Subject Parameter and as the Peripheral Variation we analyze dative case/gender marking in German. The discussions of the two types of parameters in relation to the observations from 2L1 children support the idea of the existence of a concept such as that of parameters and thus also contribute to the debate against a parametric approach to language variation from the perspective of bilingual first language acquisition.

The simultaneous bilingual children have to acquire variation in not just one language, but in both of their languages. We will show that in the cases of Core-Parameters and Sub-Case-Parameters neither the amount of input which the bilingual child receives nor the language (im-)balance measured in the bilingual child has an influence on the setting of the parameter and that the acquisition process is complete, i.e. adult-like by the age of 5. In contrast, language (im)balance does matter in the third case, the Peripheral Variation, and incomplete acquisition may arise, depending on the proficiency level in the respective language. However, the peripheral grammatical domains are also problematic in monolingual acquisition. The main purpose of the article is to take the term 'incomplete acquisition' seriously and to raise doubts about incomplete acquisition processes when it comes to variation covered by Core- and Sub-Case-Parameters. Furthermore, if 'incomplete acquisition' is observed with peripheral grammatical phenomena, this is so in bilingual and monolingual individuals.

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Keywords: Core-Parameters; Sub-Case-Parameters; Peripheral Variation; Cross-linguistic influence; Target-like achievement; Language proficiency

[☆] We want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Further thanks go to Nadine Eichler, Veronika Jansen and Katrin Schmitz with whom we have discussed earlier versions of this paper.

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1. Introduction

The term heritage language is generally used to define languages other than the dominant language(s) in a speech community. In Germany, German is the dominant and official language, which is used in government, schools and public communication. The individuals who use a heritage language are called heritage speakers. Heritage speakers have acquired their heritage language at home and the other language outside their family. In other words, both parents are native speakers of the heritage language and master the language of the host country to a differing degree, some only understand it and seldom speak it. The database of the present study consists of 24 simultaneous bilingual children who acquire two Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish) or one Romance language and German in their families who live in Germany or in the Romance countries. The children will be investigated until they have reached the age of 4 and lots of them until the age of 5. Recently, researchers have taken these simultaneous bilingual children (2L1) to figure among heritage speakers (HSs), defined by [Cabo and Rothman \(2012:450\)](#) as a bilingual speaker “who has acquired a family language (the heritage language) and a societal language naturalistically in early childhood”. Indeed, some 2L1 children find themselves in the same situation as HSs, where the home functions “as the domain for one language only” ([Romaine, 1995:191f.](#)). In contrast to HSs, the simultaneous bilingual subjects of the present study are exposed to both of their languages at home, i.e. they have native parents of the respective languages. Notwithstanding, these 2L1 children find themselves in a similar situation as heritage speakers since they receive less input in the language, which is not supported by society. Less input refers to the number of people who interact with the child in the non-community language. In some homes, the parent native in the heritage language is the only person providing the child with the relevant input. Less input also refers to the hours exposed to the non-community language per day or week. In some homes, the parent native in the heritage language is working during the day, which has the consequence of reducing the number of hours the child is exposed to the non-community language per day or week. If we take the “input situation” of the 2L1 children seriously, they might perfectly figure among the HSs.

Recently, [Montrul \(2008, 2011\)](#) has argued in several studies that HSs are individuals subject to incomplete acquisition. She has convincingly shown that there is variation among HSs with respect to certain aspects of language, including tense, aspect, modality, differential object marking and gender. In contrast, monolingual first language learners (L1) acquire these aspects early in life, in the case of gender before the age of 3. According to [Montrul \(2008\)](#), the differences between HSs and L1 children are to be explained in terms of incomplete acquisition, i.e. heritage speakers fail to acquire the heritage language completely. The input, which the heritage speakers receive, is seen as the reason for why acquisition of the heritage language is incomplete.

However, things are more complicated. For simultaneous bilingual children, who have heard both languages at home and who have been raised in a monolingual country (Germany), [Müller \(1998b\)](#) has shown that some take until the age of 5 in order to acquire target-like finite verb placement in German. Finite subordinate clauses are verb-final in German. [Müller \(1998b\)](#) assumes that the children transfer part of their grammatical knowledge of the Romance language to German, since the target-deviant structures in German subordinate clauses differ as a function of the Romance language, which they acquire simultaneously with German. More importantly, [Fritzenschaft et al. \(1990\)](#) show that even a monolingual German child who has been exposed to a German dialect, in this case Hessian, takes several months to acquire the target-like order of High German. [Müller \(1998b\)](#) hypothesizes that the children, monolingual or bilingual, “inspect” the C-domain. If the language spoken to the child (Hessian in the case of the monolingual German child, Italian in the case of bilingual children) exhibits doubly-filled COMPs, the child may be misled for subordinate clauses and utters subordinate clauses of the type COMP- V_{fin} -S-X (*wenn hab ich geburtstag* ‘when have I birthday’) which should be COMP-S-X- V_{fin} in adult German, filling the COMP doubly with a subordinate conjunction in the specifier and a finite verb in COMP (cf. [Müller, 2007](#) for an analysis of German subordinate clauses at the syntax–pragmatics interface). Input plays a major role in the argumentation. Since adult German and the German dialects exhibit non-verb-final subordinate clauses, (monolingual and bilingual) children overgeneralize a lexically restricted option of the adult system to all subordinate conjunctions in German, reinforced by the Romance language in the case of bilingual children. Interestingly, the children only manage to converge to adult German in an item-by-item fashion, i.e. for each subordinate conjunction separately ([Müller, 1998b, 2007](#)). Target-like finite verb placement has been argued by many linguists to belong to core syntax. Therefore, one could argue that Montrul is right by assuming that some grammatical domains are acquired incompletely. Notice, however, that all bilingual children who are misled, manage to acquire the target-like order of finite verbs in German subordinate clauses around the age of 5. Furthermore, also monolingual children who acquire two German dialects pass through a target-deviant stage, which extends over several months. Finite verb placement in German subordinate clauses is therefore acquired “completely” by monolinguals and bilinguals, however some children only manage to do so in an item-by-item fashion.

Another interpretation of the data is possible and suggested by one reviewer. The central idea is that the child uses multiple grammars within a single grammar ([Roepert, 1999](#)). The assumption is that children are speaking with one grammar when they might be speaking with another. This state of affairs is not a failure to know a grammar, but a failure to

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