
Word stress and determiner omission in French-Spanish bilingual language acquisition

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As has been demonstrated in monolingual and bilingual L1 acquisition research, children tend to omit determiners in early acquisitional phases, yielding ungrammatical bare noun structures. From a phonological perspective, weak syllables (typically associated with function words like determiners) are most prone to omission (Boyle/Gerken 1997) although children produce vocalic segments in determiner positions as placeholders (Demuth/Tremblay 2008, Lleó 1998) and are perceptually sensitive to determiners (Gerken/McIntosh 1993). The comparison of French and Spanish in one bilingual individual (age 2;2,0-3;1,24) offers an interesting testing ground for the syntax/prosody interface since the phonological systems of these two languages differ importantly with respect to word stress. Ungrammatical bare nouns are mostly found in Spanish (dropping from 24% to 10% to 2% over three recordings) and nearly inexistent in French during the observed period (0-3%). Co-occurring with lexico-syntactic factors (Müller 1994), the child generally omits determiners in sequences of adjacent unstressed syllables and after high boundary tones. Possible explanations for the unbalanced distribution of ungrammatical bare nouns may be related to words stress: Predictably final stress in French is more readily acquired than the variable position in Spanish. These first results hint at an ‘invasive’ impact of phonology on syntax in bilingual language acquisition.

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