

Direct and indirect object omission in the Spanish of bilingual Spanish-French children
Melanie Elliott

University of Toronto

Recent studies on developmental object omissions show delay in bilingual children as unidirectional quantitative differences with respect to monolinguals; this is interpreted as a consequence of cross-linguistic influences (Müller & Hulk, 2001). These data come from languages contrasting in the availability of null objects. Is there still a bilingual effect in omissions once cross-linguistic differences are factored out? Some studies show this is the case (Pérez-Leroux et al. 2009, Pirvulescu et al. 2014) but the language combination of bilingual children is limited (French and English).

We focus on the bilingual acquisition of two pronominal clitic languages, Spanish and French and report on the developmental timetable of Spanish in bilinguals and monolinguals.

An elicited production picture task was conducted in Spanish on 74 Spanish-French balanced bilingual children living in Paris, France (ages 2;11 to 5;11) and 52 Spanish monolingual children (ages 2;4 to 5;11) in Madrid, Spain eliciting first direct objects, then indirect objects. An example of the tasks is given below:

- (1) *Prompt:* Que quiere hacer Rita con la pelota? / “What does Rita want to do with the ball?”
Target answer: lanzarla / “throw it”

Results show that object omission in Spanish is higher in bilingual than in monolingual children ($F_{(1,119)}=33.57, p<.000$). Monolingual children stop omitting between 2-3 years of age, while bilingual children stop between 4-5 years, confirming the hypothesis of a bilingual delay in the absence of cross-linguistic influences.

Our results enforce the idea of a Spanish dialectal variation since in Columbian Spanish the rate of omissions is significantly higher (35% in 3-year-old direct objects, cf. Castilla & Pérez-Leroux, 2010). For bilingual children, the results are similar to Pérez-Leroux et al. 2011 (for Spanish-English children) showing substantial omission in young children. Finally, the results for bilingual children’s object omission in language pairs that exclude cross-linguistic influence more generally seem to confirm the hypothesis of a bilingual delay in the absence of cross-linguistic influence.

We analyze these results following the hypothesis of the retention of a default null object representation (Pirvulescu et al. 2014) within a variationist frame (Yang, 2004). We assume that referential null objects are universally part of the initial child grammar. Delay in object omissions in bilingual children is due to a reduction and more variation in the input. In this case, the referential null object is retained longer. If the analysis is correct, it shows that for some languages (European Spanish here), examining delay in bilingual children can uncover a stage that is very hard to notice in monolingual development.

Table 1. Mean proportions (s. d. in parenthesis) of object types produced by bilingual (balanced) and monolingual Spanish children and adults in direct and indirect object clitic elicitation tasks.

	Age (yrs)	Task1: Direct Object Clitic Elicitation			Task 2: Indirect Object Clitic Elicitation		
		DP	CL	Omissions	DP	CL	Omissions
Bilingual	3	0.06(0.05)	0.59(0.11)	0.35(0.09)	0.15(0.06)	0.56(0.13)	0.29(0.11)
	4	0	0.80(0.05)	0.20(0.05)	0.14(0.07)	0.77(0.05)	0.09(0.06)
	5	0.06(0.09)	0.88(0.11)	0.06(0.06)	0.16(0.05)	0.80(0.12)	0.04(0.06)
Monolingual	2	0.04(0.07)	0.85(0.12)	0.11(0.15)	0.12(0.09)	0.74(0.13)	0.14(0.10)

	3	0.05(0.05)	0.92(0.08)	0.03(0.08)	0.11(0.08)	0.88(0.07)	0.01(0.11)
	4	0.02(0.06)	1.0(0.06)	0	0.04(0.09)	0.96(0.11)	0
	5	0.03(0.09)	1.0(0.06)	0	0.03(0.04)	0.97(0.05)	0

References

- Castilla, A. P., & Pérez-Leroux, A. T. (2010). Omissions and substitutions in Spanish object clitics: Developmental optionality as a property of the representational system. *Language Acquisition*, 17, 2–25.
- Pérez-Leroux, A. T., Pirvulescu, M., & Roberge, Y. (2009). Bilingualism as a window into the language faculty: The acquisition of objects in French-speaking children in bilingual and monolingual contexts. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 12, 97–112.
- Pérez-Leroux, A. T., Cuza, A. & Thomas, D. (2011). Clitic placement in Spanish / English bilingual children. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 14, 221-232.
- Pirvulescu, M. Pérez-Leroux, A.T., Roberge, Y., Strik, N., & Thomas, D. (2014) Bilingual effects: Exploring object omission in pronominal Languages, *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 17 (3), 495-510.
- Müller, N., & Hulk, A. (2001). Crosslinguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition: Italian and French as recipient languages. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 4, 1–21.
- Unsworth, S., Argyri, F., Cornips, L., Hulk, A., Sorace, A., & Tsimpli, I. (2011). On the role of age of onset and input in early child bilingualism in Greek and Dutch. In M. Pirvulescu, M. C. Cuervo, A. T. Pérez-Leroux, J. Steele & N. Strik (eds.), *Proceedings of GALANA 4*, pp. 249–265. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.
- Wexler, K., Gavarró, A. & Torrens, V. (2004). Feature checking and object clitic omission in child Catalan. In Reineke Bok-Bennema, Bart Hollebrandse, Brigitte Kampers-Mahne & Petra Sleeman (eds), *Romance languages and linguistic theory*, 253-269, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Yip, V., & Matthews, S. (2005). Dual input and learnability: Null objects in Cantonese–English bilingual children. In J. Cohen, K. T. McAlister, K. Rolstad & J. MacSwan (eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism*, pp. 2421–2431. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.
- Yang, C. (2004). Universal Grammar, statistics, or both. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8, 451–456.