

CLITIC DOUBLING AMONG SPANISH-NAHUATL BILINGUAL CHILDREN

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This article looks at the accusative clitic doubling feature made by bilingual children (Spanish and Nahuatl) as a result of the influence of one language on the other (cross-linguistic influence). The testing involves a grammaticality judgment task (adapted for children) and a production task, in order to determine if children can separate their linguistic systems and also to find out if the specificity plays a determinant role for the accusative clitic doubling. Following Hulk and Müller (2000), it is predicted that children are able to separate their linguistic systems; however cross-linguistic influence is not excluded. Furthermore, against Suñer (1988) I will show that specificity does not establish the conditions for the accusative clitic doubling.

1. My theoretical background

The idea of whether children separate their linguistic systems when they are acquiring two languages simultaneously is very discussed (De Houwer 1995, Meisel 1989, Paradis & Genesee 1996, Volterra and Taeschner 1978, among others). For instance, it has been suggested that bilingual children construct a unitary grammatical system (Volterra & Taeschner 1978 among others). From this point of view, authors suggest that bilingual children form only one grammar and one lexicon for the languages they are acquiring. Under this view, Volterra and Taeschner (1979) propose three stages in the acquisition. In the first one they suggest that children form one lexicon for the two languages acquired. During the second stage, children apply the same syntactic rules for both languages; it means they have a unitary syntactic system. Finally, at the stage three, bilingual children are able to separate their two languages on the lexical as well as in the syntactic levels. Volterra and Taeschner (1978) base their proposal on the co-occurrence of words and structures of one language in the other.

Other scholars suggest that bilingual children construct separate grammar and lexicon for each language from very early stages in the acquisition (Meisel 1989, De Houwer 1995, Paradis & Genesee 1996, among others). In this case it has been found that French-German bilingual children know how to use the correct word order in their respective languages (Meisel, 1989).

However, how can we explain the fact of the co-occurrence of words and structures of one language in the other? More recently, Hulk and Muller (2000) among others, in a refined version of the separate hypothesis, propose that even though bilingual children separate their grammar and lexicon cross-linguistic

influence (and with this they mean the influence of one language in the other) is never excluded. Hulk and Muller (2000) assume that “cross-linguistic influence is more likely to occur in exactly those areas which are also problematic –albeit to a lesser extent- for monolingual children” (Hulk and Muller, 2000:228).

Authors consider that c-domain constitutes that area, because it is also a problematic area in the monolingual acquisition.

Hulk and Müller (2000) also mention that bilingual children are exposed to a wider range of syntactic possibilities than monolingual children, who just have available the options of one language. According to this, bilingual children have to choose between two possible syntactic analyses, if they pick the wrong one, obviously, it will lead to problems but if they pick the right one, it will lead to facilitation (Paradis and Genesee, 1995; Paradis and Genesee, 1996).

According to the authors, cross-linguistic influence is possible just when two conditions are both met. These conditions are:

1) Cross-linguistic influence takes place at the interface between pragmatics and syntax in the C-domain.

2) Cross-linguistic influence happens when one of the languages (of the bilingual child) permits more than one syntactic analysis and the other language supports one of the two possible analyses.

1.1 What about clitics?

Regarding the position clitics have in the structure of the phrase, I will consider that clitics head their own functional projection (following Sportiche, 1993; Franco, 1993 and Torrego, 1995) and I also assume that clitics are functional heads that are base generated and then moves to the specifier of the clitic phrase.

I also would like to mention that most of the analysis of clitic objects in Spanish locate clitics somewhere in the CP projection, so following Hulk and Müller (2000) we can also assume that we can expect cross-linguistic influence in this area (Montrul, 2001:183).

2. Spanish and Nahuatl: Why am I studying these languages?

Nahuatl is an indigenous language that is still spoken in Mexico. This language belonged to the Aztecs' culture.

The Aztecs were a Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilization in Mexico. Before the Spanish colonization of the Americas, the Aztecs were the most powerful and prestiged civilization and therefore their language, *Nahuatl*, was even considered the lingua franca for so many years. The Spanish arrived to America in 1521 so we are talking about almost 500 years of language contact, and the phenomenon that we have so far as a result of the contact is very interesting. Currently, in Mexico there are around one million Nahuatl speakers, and even though the amount sounds good enough for the permanency and consolidation of the language I have to mention that these million Nahuatl speakers are spread in little towns all over the Mexican territory.

In terms of the language structure, Spanish and Nahuatl are very different. Nahuatl, for example, is a polysynthetic language; it means it has a

free word order where the verb is the heart of the phrase and everything can move around it and it is an agglutinative language.

I started to feel interested on this topic because I have realized that all Mexicans at least the ones that are being in contact with indigenous people are aware of the existence of clitic doubling in the Spanish indigenous variety. If someone can ask to a Mexican to imitate the Spanish indigenous variety they will start doubling clitics, but not any clitic, and I am going to explain this later on.

3. Objectives

For this research I want to consider if there is cross-linguistic influence in Spanish and Nahuatl and I also want to find out if the specificity is a determinant factor for the clitic doubling. For this objective I want to point out that Suñer (1988) mentions that clitic doubling obeys specificity restrictions. With this she means that animate noun phrases can be doubled by the accusative clitic *lo* and *la*, (they both are equivalent to *it* in English) while non-specific direct objects can not be doubled. She bases her hypothesis in the Rioplatense Spanish. Let us see the phrases below.

- (1) (Lo) ví a Alfredo
CL saw.1SG A Alfredo
'I saw Alfredo'

In (1) we can double the clitic since we have a specific noun phrase.

- (2) Mis amigos fueron a un safari y no (*lo) vieron a ningún elefante
My friends went to a safari and neg *CL they.see A any elephant
'They went to a safari and they did not see any elephant'

In (2) we have the phrase 'They went to a safari and they did not see any elephant'. In this phrase *any elephant* is not referred to a specific elephant but to any elephant, so in this case, according to Suñer (1988), we cannot double the clitic. Finally, I want to show that the clitic doubling in the Spanish indigenous variety follows a pattern.

3.1 Why do indigenous people double the accusative clitic in Spanish?

To answer this question it is necessary to explain the structure of Nahuatl. In this language we have the next structure with transitive verbs:

- (3) Ni- k- nequi tortillas
I-pro it-obj.agr. want-1st tortillas
'Yo quiero tortillas'

In Spanish the same structure with transitive verbs is expressed as follows:

- (4) Yo quiero tortillas
 I want tortillas
 'I want tortillas' (Standard Spanish)

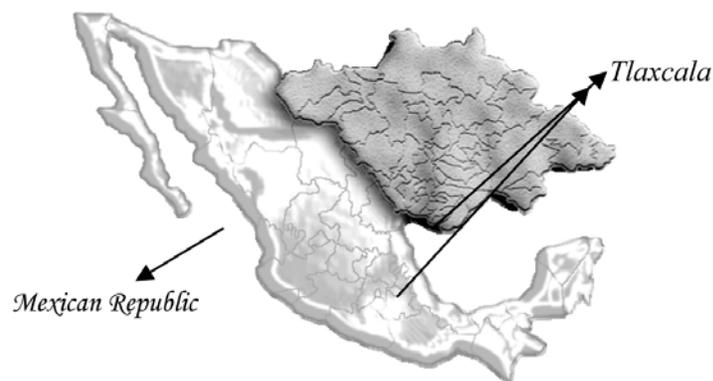
Thus, in the indigenous Spanish variety we have the same expression as follows:

- (5) Yo lo quiero tortillas
 I it want tortillas
 'I want tortillas' (Standard Spanish)

As we can see in (4) in Spanish we do not need any object agreement but in Nahuatl we do. So what is going on in the Spanish indigenous variety? Well indigenous Spanish speakers transfer the object agreement into Spanish through the clitic "lo" (See (5)). Thus, at the same time they are doubling the clitic, they are also transferring a feature that exists in their language to a space that seems empty for them in Spanish.

4. The place of my research and the participants

In order to achieve my goals I developed an experiment. I went to Mexico, to a little town called San Isidro Buensuceso, which is located in Tlaxcala about two hours from Mexico City (See map below). In this town almost everyone speaks Nahuatl and it is a very important language for them. That is essential to mention because as we also know, the situation of indigenous people is very difficult and sometimes they have to give up their language for the majority language, in this case Spanish, but in this town some children are growing up bilingual and they speak Nahuatl at home but Spanish at school.



In total I had ten participants, 8 bilingual children (Nahuatl/Spanish) and 2 monolingual children (Spanish) as my control group. Their ages vary from 4 to 11 years old and just four of my participants go to the school, the rest of them stayed at home.

5. Methodologies

I had two different methodologies; one of them was a grammaticality judgment task. For this task we basically played with puppets. I told the kids that the puppet I was playing with used to say wrong sentences and I said to them: “if you hear something wrong you tell him, you are speaking wrong and correct him, because he wants to learn how to speak well”. Thus, my puppet said some phrases, correct ones and incorrect ones, so kids could identify what phrases were correct and what phrases were not. I presented 20 phrases in total and I divided them into five categories as follow:

Phrases with transitive verbs-clitic (cl) (as in (6) and (7))

- (6) Marisol puso una olla en la mesa
'Mary put the pot on the table'
- (7) Luz dibujó un borreguito
'Luz draw a little sheep'

Phrases with intransitive verbs-cl (as in (8) and (9))

- (8) María está feliz con el regalo
'Mary is happy with the gift'
- (9) El otro día mi papá fue al campo
'The other day, my father went to the countryside'

***Phrases with transitive verbs+cl+specific NP (as in (10) and (11))**

- (10) *La señora lo puso una vela en la mesa
*‘The lady cl put a candle on the table’
- (11) *Juanita lo dibujó un gatito
*‘Juanita cl draw a kitten’

***Phrases with transitive verbs+cl-specific NP (as in (12) and (13))**

- (12) *La gente lo vendía cosas
*‘People cl used to sell things’
- (13) *Pablito lo compró pan
*‘Pablito cl bought bread’

***Phrase with intransitive verbs+cl (as in (14) and (15))**

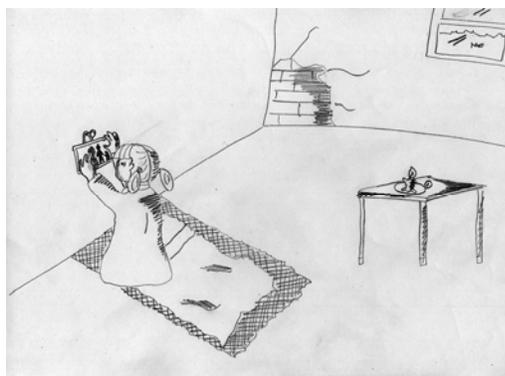
- (14) *Juanita lo está feliz con el tesoro
 *‘Juanita cl is happy with the treasure’
- (15) *Pascual lo fue al mercado
 *‘Pascual cl went to the market’

The second methodology was a production task. In this methodology I had a short story that contained transitive and intransitive verbs. I was telling the story and at the same time I showed the kids some pictures related to the story (See pictures below). At the end of the story I asked them some questions about it. Thus for example, I asked them, what is this woman doing in the Picture 1? They could answer *She smashes tomatoes with her hands* or *She “clitic” smashes tomatoes with her hands*.



Picture 1. Example of the pictures showed during the production task.

Another example could be: What does Juanita do in the Picture 2? They might answer: *Juanita put the photograph on the wall* or *Juanita “clitic” put the photograph on the wall*.



Picture 2. Example of the pictures showed during the production task.

What I was expecting was that regardless of the NP specificity I was going to find clitic doubling just in phrases with transitive verbs, for both methodologies.

6. My results

I divided my results in grammatical and agrammatical phrases, but with agrammaticality I do not mean that they are speaking wrong but that they are choosing the option with the clitic doubling and this doubling would be agrammatical in the standard Spanish. In the grammaticality judgment task we can see that with the phrases with Intransitive verbs+clitic (therefore the option I was not expecting to find clitic doubling) they picked just 30% of the times the option with the clitic doubling (See Figure 1 below).

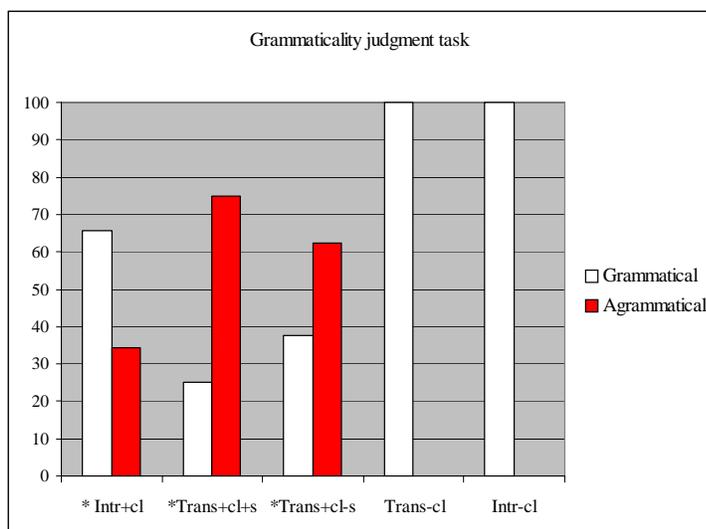


Figure 1. Grammaticality judgment task

It means they preferred the option without clitic (in phrases with intransitive verbs-clitic). We have the opposite result with the phrases with transitive verbs+cl, in this case we can see that children prefer the option with the clitic doubling. This is what I was expecting, since as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we know that clitics are located somewhere in the c-domain and that this domain is considered an area of cross-linguistic influence.

The last columns of the Figure 1 show that my participants did not have any problem accepting phrases with transitive and intransitive verbs without clitics. It also shows that my participants have two syntactic options available.

1) One option that does not need to double the clitic but that still is correct to them since it is a possible structure in Spanish.

2) A second option that doubles the clitic and that completes the sense of the sentence for them.

We can also see in the Figure 1 that there is not too much difference in the acceptance of clitic doubling with specific NP's or non-specific NP's. Let us see the Figure 2 below.

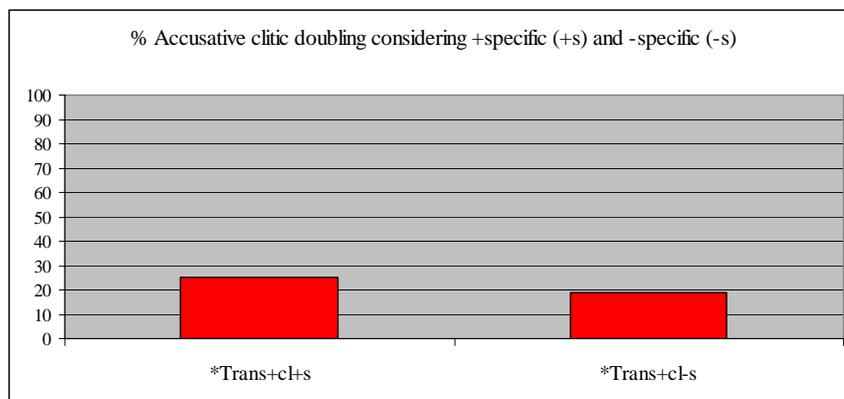


Figure 2. Percentage of accusative clitic doubling +specific (+s) and –specific (-s)

In Figure 2 we can clearly see that the difference between specific and non-specific is just of almost the 5%. So it indicates that no matter the nature of the NP the clitic doubling is possible. The same feature has been found in other researches as in Atoche (2001) in the case of Quechua-Spanish in Peru.

Finally in the production task (Figure 3) we can see that participants double the clitics more than the 30% in transitive contexts but just a 5% in intransitive contexts. It indicates that, in fact, participants are doubling clitics because of the influence of Nahuatl and Spanish.

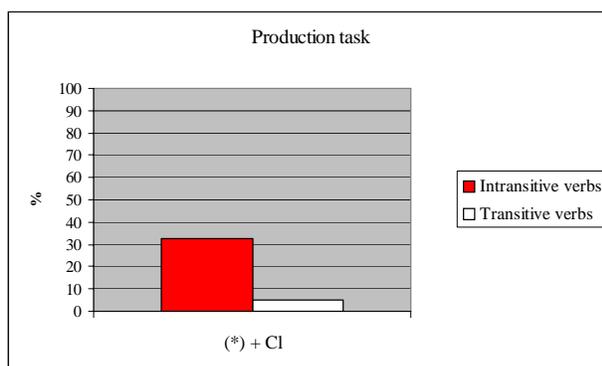


Figure 3. Production task

Now the question is if these kids can overcome this stage of cross-linguistic influence. I think the answer has to do more with their exposure to the Standard Spanish variety. Since they are in the same town since they were born and the only variety they listen to is the indigenous one, the clitic doubling has started to be a new dialect. So without the help of a crystal ball to see the future

of these kids, we can actually see their language future reflected in the way their parents speak, and they also double clitics.

7. Conclusions

As we can see bilingual children can differentiate between the two languages but still we find cross-linguistic influence. We saw that the NP specificity is not a factor for the clitic doubling and something else I realized is that the input plays an important role. I would like to make more research about this topic and I would like also to include other factors as the level of formal education. And I also would like to include more phrases to my test, with intransitive verbs that can be transitive in some contexts.

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