

Pronoun Acquisition in a Varilingual Context

Samantha Jackson, University of Toronto

Background: Varilingual environments are characterised by mixing different levels of two codes based on factors such as situation, addressee, topic and proficiency in both codes (Youssef, 2010, p. 69); code-mixing is widely accepted and practised locally (Youssef, 2010, p. 71). The term varilingualism as a name for the competence that guides this mixing was coined by Youssef (1991, 1996, 2010) based on her longitudinal study of three Trinidadian children.

In Trinidad, there is partial overlap between Trinidadian English Creole (TrinEC) and Trinidad and Tobago English (TTE). For example, the pronoun system of TrinEC is similar to TTE in its use of commonly attested forms such as subjective ‘I’, ‘s/he’ and ‘we’ or objective ‘me’ and ‘them’ but it differs by permitting some less frequently attested forms, e.g., subjective ‘me’ as in “Me ain’t know” or objective ‘we’ as in “Two of we get a basket”.

While monolingual English-speaking children can be expected to acquire subject, object and possessive pronouns by 46 months and reflexive pronouns from 47 months onwards (Samad & Arshad, 2017) and norms such as these are used for comparison of typically developing children with special populations such as those with autism or Down Syndrome, or bilingual speakers, pronoun acquisition in the varilingual context of Trinidad remains unexamined.

Present study: This study investigates pronoun acquisition in a varilingual context by addressing two questions: “*How do Trinidadian preschoolers express subject, object, possessive and reflexive pronouns?*” and “*When faced with a choice between TrinEC and TTE pronouns, what factors influence these children’s choices?*”

Data and methods: Seventy-five three- to five-year-olds produced pronouns via a word elicitation task conducted in both languages. Twenty-six children also participated in 30-minute play sessions aimed at capturing natural, spontaneous language. Pronoun tokens were extracted; coded for age, sex, district, test language, grammatical number, gender and person, pronoun type, and variant selected; and tallied for distributional analysis. Mixed-effects logistic regressions were used to determine which factors influenced pronoun choice.

Results: Results are consistent with expectations for monolingual English speakers when the pronoun systems overlap. When systems diverge, children prefer TrinEC pronouns: subjective ‘them’ (“Them eating something”), objective ‘she’ and ‘he’ (“He hugging she and she hugging he”), <-own> or <-one> for third person possessive (“The snake is he own”), and a variety of less frequently attested pronouns for third person reflexive, e.g., ‘heself’, ‘sheself’ and ‘theyself’. Variables influencing production were main effects of pronoun type, grammatical number, gender and person, the district the children lived in and their age; an interaction between grammatical number and test language was also significant. The variability of their pronoun production indicates that Trinidadian children are familiar with both codes and that TrinEC is their more comfortable and possibly more proficient language. The ability of test language to influence which language is produced suggests that these children have varilingual competence.

Implications: These findings should be considered by speech language pathologists to avoid misdiagnosis. Additionally, specialised English teaching materials may be necessary due to the overlap of pronoun systems, range of TrinEC pronouns and strong influence of TrinEC.

Keywords: acquisition, pronouns, varilingualism, Trinidad, Caribbean

References

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