Semantic and Syntactic Patterns in the English Language Learner

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Content Area: Basic Communication Processes

Instructional Level: Intermediate

Continuing Education Units: .1 (1 hour)

Objectives:

Participants will be able to demonstrate knowledge in and identify:

- Basic principles of the Competition Model and its application to bilingual language learning
- Different types of code-switching
- How to determine what specific vocabulary to probe in each language
- Why it is essential to test bilingual children in both languages.
- Typical preposition errors in Spanish-influenced English
- Typical verb substitutions in Spanish-influenced English
- Common syntax errors produced by English language learners.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), nearly one in five Americans speaks a language other than English at home. The vast majority of those speaking a language other than English at home speak Spanish. The Spanish speaking population increased by 62 percent from 1990 to 2000, and approximately half of this population reported they speak English as well. The same trends have also been noted by the Department of Education's National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA). The NCELA reported that over three million children (11.7% of children in the U.S.) enrolled in grades Pre-K through 6 were classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) in the 2000-2001 school year and that Spanish was the primary language of 79% of these students (Kindler, 2002). These statistics highlight the need for teachers, speech-language pathologists, and other professionals to have an understanding of typical patterns of language development in the growing population of Spanish-English bilingual children in U.S. schools.

Many models have been proposed in attempts to explain the processes bilinguals go through when acquiring their two languages. One of the more accepted models, which was first applied to monolingual language learning and then to bilingual language learning, is the Competition Model. The Competition Model was proposed by Bates and MacWhinney (1982, 1987, 1989) to explain how individuals learn language. In this model, learners are believed to rely on specific linguistic cues in the language they hear to learn the rules of their language(s). The cues that children learn earliest are those that occur most frequently and consistently. For example, in English, word order is fairly rigid. Subject-verb-object word order as in "The boy pet the puppy" is more common than object-verb-subject order as in "The puppy was pet by the boy." As a result,

listeners can use word order as a cue to gather information about which word is the subject, verb, or object.

The catch for bilinguals is that not all cues are the same across languages (MacWhinney, 1997). Different amounts of exposure to each language will result in different types of cue use. Children who learn a first language (L1) at home and begin to acquire a second language (L2) in kindergarten may initially use cues from L1 when expressing themselves in L2. This is called *forward cue transfer*, and it often is used when language learners have not figured out the cue system of the second language. Instead of refraining from communicating, children do the next best thing, which is to use what they know. Let's look at an example. In Spanish, adjectives often come after the noun as in "gato negro." If a child applies the Spanish cue for noun-adjective word order to English, we might see something like "cat black." Another common pattern we might see is the transfer of singular and plural cues. Some words that are singular in Spanish are plural in English, and vice versa. For instance, the word "muebles" is plural in Spanish, while its counterpart "furniture" is singular in English. On the other hand, "gente" is singular in Spanish, but its translation "people" is plural in English. So we might see a child use forward transfer to produce utterances such as "The furniture*s are* dirty" and "The people *is* nice" in English.

There are other types of cue transfer as well. B*ackward transfer* occurs when children use a strategy learned from L2 when communicating in L1. This typically occurs as children gain proficiency in L2. *Differentiation* is another type of transfer that describes when bilinguals use separate strategies for each language that are identical to those used by monolinguals of each language. This typically occurs with children who

have a high level of proficiency in both languages. Finally, *amalgamation* refers to a single set of strategies applied to both languages. This is most common in communities with a large population of bilinguals in which code-switching is the prevalent mode of communication. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on forward transfer because it is the most common type of transfer for early sequential bilinguals, those who learn their L1 at home and begin learning their L2 later in preschool or elementary school. Most bilinguals in elementary schools are classified as early sequential bilinguals.

Semantics

One of the most obvious types of forward cue transfer in the realm of semantics is the substitution of Spanish words for English words. For example, "I want el libro (the book)" might be used when an English language learner does not know the vocabulary word for "book." This is referred to as code-switching, and though it is often used by normal adult bilinguals, they use it differently. Many adults code-switch to add emphasis to what they are saying. They also generally code-switch only when they know their audience will understand it. Children learning English as a second language may code-switch when it is the only way they know to express an idea.

Due to the different contexts in which they learn each language, bilingual children typically learn different words in each language. For example, a child whose home language is Spanish may be more familiar with food items and daily routine words such as "toothbrush" in Spanish. The child in an English-speaking classroom may learn academic concepts and school-related words such as "recess" in English. Research on bilingual children's expressive vocabulary shows an approximate overlap of only 30% of

words with the same meaning (Pearson, Fernandez, & Oller, 1995; Peña, Bedore, & Zlatic, 2001). This research demonstrates that early school age sequential bilinguals have very different vocabularies in each language. This is a normal process in the acquisition of a second language and highlights the importance of assessing children's complete repertoire of vocabulary in both languages.

Thorough information about a child's language history and use is essential in helping practitioners determine realistic expectations of children's language use in English. A study by Pearson and colleagues (Pearson, Fernández, Lewedeg, & Oller, 1997) showed that the proportion of input in L1 and L2 was directly related to the proportion of words used in each language. In other words, the more English one hears, the more English one uses. The same is true for Spanish. Using information from a language survey, such as the number of years a child has been exposed to each language, the amount of each language they hear and use daily, and the contexts in which they use each language can provide valuable information about the expected vocabulary in each language. Related to this idea is the issue of specific vocabulary in each language. If we know that output, or language expression, is related to linguistic input, it makes sense that if children learn academic concepts in English, as suggested previously, they will have a much easier time talking about those concepts in English. Likewise, if children learn about cooking and meal preparation in Spanish, it will be much easier for them to talk about such topics in Spanish. Thus, it is crucial to consider the language history in the assessment process.

You have probably considered before that culture and language are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to separate them. This is certainly the case in the area of

semantics. Consider the typical foods associated with different cultures. Children faced with a test item such as "Apples and oranges are both (fruits)" would have an advantage if apples and oranges were common foods for them. Children would be at a slight disadvantage on this item if mangos and papayas were more common in their households. Thus, consideration of the cultural content of testing tools is important for distinguishing language differences versus language disorders.

Another very common area of transfer that has been documented in Spanish speakers acquiring English as a second language is in the use of prepositions. For example, the English prepositions "in" and "on" are both represented in Spanish by the preposition "en." Thus, a Spanish speaker acquiring English might mix up the use of the corresponding English prepositions because they are not differentiated in Spanish. Additionally, concepts represented by prepositions in English are often represented in Spanish verbs. For this reason, English is referred to as a satellite-framed language while Spanish is referred to as a verb-framed language . For example, in English, prepositions, also called satellites, are used to express direction as in to get *on* the bus and to get *off* the bus. In Spanish, that information is included in the verb (subir al bus and bajar del bus, respectively). Another example is the word *buscar* in Spanish, which means *to look for.* No preposition is needed in Spanish. One could say "Busco mi juguete*"* (*I'm looking (for) my toy*). When Spanish-speaking children learning English as a second language use forward transfer, they might produce the sentence "I'm looking my toy*,"* leaving the preposition out. Below is a table that includes examples of common uses of Spanish prepositions, their English translations, and the possible ways they might be used by a

Spanish speaker learning English. The table is not an exhaustive list but is intended to provide examples of such occurrences.

Spanish use of prepositions	**English equivalent**	**Possible misuses of prepositions in L2 (English)**
"en"	"in" and "on"	Put the food **in** the plate.* Put the food **on** the bowl.*
"pensar en" "pensar de"	To think about or think of	I think **on** him everyday.* You can do it if you think **of** it.*
Enojarse con	Get mad at	Get mad with.*
Soñar con	To dream of	I dreamt **with** you last night*
Decidir de	To decide on	Have you decided of what you want?*
Casarse con	To marry or be married to	Is he married **with** her?*
Estar enamorado de	To be in love with	Is he in love **of** her?*
Consistir en	To consist of	What does your plan consist **in**?*
Buscar	To look for	I'm looking my toy.*

If you assess the language skills of children learning English as a second language and notice difficulty with prepositions in English, determine whether the use of prepositions is consistent with the first language by consulting with a person familiar with Spanish. If so, they are likely using forward cue transfer, which is a normal process in second language acquisition.

Multi-purpose verbs can also be a problematic area of semantics for the English language learner. Verbs such as "do, "make," "put," and "take" are highly subject to transfer of meaning from L1. An example of a multi-purpose verb in English is "to put." One can "put a book on a shelf," "put their clothes on," "be put out with someone," or "put up money for a cause," among other uses. In the table below are common phrases

using multi-purpose verbs, their English equivalent, and possible misuses by children learning English.

Spanish phrases with multi-purpose verbs	**English equivalents**	**Possible misuses of multi-purpose verbs in L2 (English)**
Tomar una decision	To make a decision	Did you **take** a decision?*
Poner una cita	To make an appointment	Do you want to **put** an appointment?*
Tener hambre	To be hungry	Do you have hunger?*
Tener X años	To be X years old.	I have 6 years.

Often multi-purpose verbs have one common translation (e.g. poner—to put, tomar—to take) and other less common translations (in the case of tomar, however, it is also commonly used for "to drink"). English phrases such as those in the table above are often produced by English language learners using the most common translations. Again, before diagnosing semantic language impairment, consider whether a child is using transfer from L1 to L2. If you see a consistent pattern between meaning in L1 and production in L2, the child is likely exhibiting normal transfer patterns.

Syntax

There are a number of syntactic operations that differ in English and Spanish, all of which are subject to forward transfer by Spanish speakers learning English as a second language. Children who have learned Spanish and are in the process of learning English are likely to use syntactic cues from Spanish in English until they have had enough English exposure or instruction to learn the cues in English.

Word Order

Word order, which was mentioned in the introduction of this paper, is one such area. Word order in Spanish is very flexible, while in English the prevailing word order is subject-verb-object (SVO). In Spanish the phrase "Juan hit me" can be expressed as

either “Me pegó Juan” or “Juan me pegó.” As a result, a Spanish speaker learning English might transfer the flexible word order of Spanish to English to produce “Me hit Juan” or “Juan me hit.” “

Another syntactic difference between English and Spanish is in the use of pronouns. In English pronouns are required after the subject is introduced while in Spanish pronouns are commonly dropped. The pair of sentences “Mary went to the store. She bought bread” would be translated to Spanish as “Mary fue a la tienda. Compró pan.” So a child who transfers L1 cues to L2 might say “Mary went to the store. Bought bread,” which is the literal translation. Again, this type of production is not evidence of a disorder but of a difference resulting from L1 influence.

Negation

The production of negatives also differs in Spanish and English. In English, single negatives are used while in Spanish double negatives are common. For example, a proficient English speaker might say “I do not want anything” while the Spanish translation would be “No quiero nada” (literally “No I want nothing”). It is not uncommon to hear Spanish-speaking children learning English use double negatives in English, such as “I no want nothing” or “I don’t want nothing.”

Plurals

Another example of a syntactic difference between Spanish and English is the marking of plurals, which are marked once in English but are double marked in Spanish. In Spanish “the big trees” would be “los arboles grandes,” which translates literally to “the trees bigs.” Forward cue transfer might result in double plural marking in English for those who have not learned the single plural marking cue of English.

The table below summarizes the syntactic differences presented here.

Spanish syntax	English Syntax	Examples of forward transfer
Statements Flexible word order	Relatively rigid word order	*Juan me hit* for *Juan hit me.*
Modifiers Noun + adjective word order	Adjective + noun word order	*She is a girl very nice* for *She is a very nice girl*
Questions No auxiliary	Auxiliary Ex. am/is/are, do/does/did	*Where you went?* for *Where did you go. Or Why you no share?* for *Why didn't you share?*
Pronouns Dropping of pronouns	Maintenance of pronouns	*Is hot today* for *It is hot today.*
Negation Double negatives	Single negative	*I no want nothing* for *I don't want anything.*
Plurality Double marking of plurals	Single marking of plurals	*The bigs trees* for *The big trees.*

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of the syntactic differences in English and Spanish, but is intended to provide practitioners with a springboard for identifying differences versus disorders in children learning English as a second language.

Summary and Conclusions

As the number of bilinguals in the U.S. grows, so too does the need for practitioners and researchers to learn more about normal processes in bilingual language acquisition. Research indicating that young bilinguals learn different meanings in each language with little overlap in both languages, as well as research demonstrating that there are normal patterns of transfer across languages highlights the need for practitioners to explore the use of both languages in an assessment situation. While the ideal way to accomplish this is with a bilingual practitioner who is knowledgeable in typical bilingual

development, such personnel are not always available. In those cases, monolingual practitioners can work with a bilingual colleague to determine whether the patterns exhibited are a result of influence across languages. For both the monolingual and bilingual practitioner, understanding that normal patterns in bilingual development often look like hallmarks of language impairment in monolingual development will lead to greater accuracy in the assessment of bilingual language skills.

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