Cross-linguistic influence and structural overlap affecting English verb placement

It is well-known that although bilingual children clearly separate their languages from very early on (cf. e.g. Genesee 1989, Meisel 1989), cross-linguistic influence between the child's languages is a fairly common phenomenon. Various proposals have been put forward to account for the source and nature of such cross-linguistic influence. In the last decade, a particularly influential approach has explored the relevance of linguistic interfaces in bilingual language acquisition (see e.g. Hulk & Müller 2000, Müller & Hulk 2001, Sorace & Filiaci 2006, and numerous subsequent studies). In their seminal work on this topic, Hulk and Müller argue that two conditions must be met in order for cross-linguistic influence to occur: (i) the two languages must display (superficial) structural similarities with respect to the phenomenon in question, and (ii) the phenomenon involves the syntax-pragmatics interface.

In this paper, we present data from a balanced Norwegian-English bilingual girl, Emma, aged 2;7-2;10, who appears to transfer V2 from Norwegian into English. V2 in Norwegian matrix clauses is not a phenomenon that depends on discourse or pragmatic factors; rather is seems to be part of core syntax. Thus, this kind of transfer suggests that cross-linguistic influence is not restricted to the syntax-pragmatics interface. Rather, we argue that structural overlap between the two languages, in combination with complexity, is the central cause for this type of influence.

Norwegian is a V2 language and generally displays V-to-C movement in main clauses. Consequently, all finite verbs move across negation and other adverbs in subject-initial matrix clauses, and invert with the subject in non-subject initial matrix clauses, as well as in *yes/no*- and *wh*-questions. Monolingual Norwegian children have been found to acquire V2 very early in all of these contexts (cf. Westergaard 2009). English, on the other hand, is a *residual V2* language, in which only auxiliaries and the copula undergo verb movement, and only in certain context. Thus, in parallel with Norwegian, English displays movement of finite auxiliaries across negation, as well as subject-verb inversion with these verbs in questions. However, in non-subject initial clauses, there is no verb movement. Moreover, finite main verbs never undergo verb movement. Although monolingual English-speaking children occasionally fail to move finite auxiliaries in the relevant contexts, overgeneralized movement of finite main verbs is hardly ever attested.

The bilingual child investigated in this study appears to master V2 in Norwegian at the same level of competence as her monolingual Norwegian peers. However, in Emma's English, we see verb movement patterns that are not attested in monolingual English acquisition. First of all, in non-subject initial matrix clauses, she produces subject-verb inversion 26.3% of the time (in 20/76 instances), resulting in constructions like (1):

(1) Now **throw I** it (Emma 2;8.5)
Target: 'Now I throw it'/'Now I'm throwing it'

Secondly, we also find deviant verb movement in negated clauses. Emma does not master *do*-insertion yet at this age. While most of her negated clauses display the typical pattern found in monolingual English-speaking children at this point of development, (2a), she also produces verb movement across negation, as in (2b) in as much as 21.8% of her negated clauses:

(2) a. Mommy **not know** that (Emma 2;8.5)
Target: 'Mommy doesn't know that.'
b. I **hurt not** this knee now (Emma 2;8.5)
Target: 'I'm not hurting this knee now.'

In addition, Emma moves the auxiliary *gonna* across negation (in 15 out of 16 cases):

(3) The teletubby **gonna not** sleep in there more (Emma 2;8.5)
Target: 'The teletubby is not gonna sleep in there anymore.'

Thirdly, we also find subject-verb inversion with finite main verbs in *yes/no*-questions. In 10 out the 12 *yes/no*-question contexts requiring *do*-insertion in the corpus the finite main verb has moved across the subject, as in (4):

(4) **Drive daddy** me to barnehage? (Emma 2;7.14)
Target: 'Will daddy drive me to the kindergarten?'

As these types of patterns are hardly ever attested in monolingual English-speaking children, it seems clear that they are the result of transfer from Norwegian into English. At first sight, this type of transfer might seem surprising. Emma appears to be transferring a less economical construction (i.e. V2) into a language that displays a more economical option (no verb movement). However, we argue that various factors make such transfer plausible and even economical. First of all, according to Henry and Tangney (1999) a language in which all verbs undergo verb movement is 'simpler' than a language in which some verbs move and some do not. Thus, one could claim that the verb movement pattern in Norwegian should be easier than that of English, since all verbs behave the same way syntactically. Although the 'inconsistency' in English does not appear to cause problems for monolingual English-speaking children, in a bilingual context, this area of grammar may become vulnerable. Moreover, as described above, English and Norwegian display certain superficial structural similarities with respect to verb placement of auxiliaries. Hence, we argue that the strong cues for generalized main clause verb movement in Norwegian enhance the cues for verb movement in English in the bilingual context, and causes occasional transfer of Norwegian verb movement patterns into English.

Thus, the results of this study suggest that cross-linguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition is facilitated in situations where there is superficial structural overlap between the two languages. The English system in itself presents ambiguous cues concerning verb placement, while the cues in Norwegian are very consistent. She therefore partially and temporarily 'borrows' full V2 from Norwegian as a *relief strategy* (Müller 1998) at a stage when the complete pattern of English verb placement (including the operation of *do*-support) is not yet acquired.

Selected references

Henry & Tangney 1999. Functional categories and parameter setting in the second-language acquisition of Irish in early childhood. In *Language Creation and Language Change: Creolization, Diachrony, and Development*. **Hulk & Müller 2000**. Bilingual first language acquisition at the interface between syntax and pragmatics. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*. **Müller & Hulk 2001**. Crosslinguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*. **Müller 1998**. Transfer in bilingual first language acquisition. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*. **Sorace & Filiaci 2006**. Anaphora resolution in near-native speakers of Italian. *Second Language Research*. **Westergaard 2009**. *The Acquisition of Word Order*.