

Direct Object Expression and its Semantic Properties in Catalan-Spanish Bilingualism

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It has recently been debated whether adult second language (L2) learners can acquire semantic features encoded through inflectional morphology. Most studies on this particular area have shown that feature reassembly into functional morphology is, if not impossible (Hawkins & Chan, 1997), a common problematic area for adult L2 learners (Lardiere, 2008; Slabakova, 2008). The present study goes beyond the adult second language acquisition context and explores this issue in a language contact situation, in Catalan-Spanish early bilingualism.

Direct Object expression in Catalan differs from that of Spanish in several ways. In this study we will focus on two morphological differences: the Differential Object Marking (DOM) and the accusative clitics *el* vs. *ho*.

Catalan, unlike Spanish, does not present the ‘personal *a*’ or DOM (1a, 1b). DOM is a morphosyntactic element whose distribution in Spanish is determined by several semantic features (Leonetti, 2004; 2008); in particular it is obligatory with [+animate] and [+specific] objects (1b, 1c). However, there are exceptions to this rule and certain vagueness in the criteria that regulate the use of DOM, not only in Spanish but also in other languages with DOM (Aissen, 2003). Syntactically speaking, it is proposed that DOM objects project an additional higher functional projection outside the VP (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo, 2008; Torrego, 1998).

Furthermore, Catalan morphologically differentiates accusative masculine singular clitic forms (*el*, *l'*, *-lo*, *'l*) from what has traditionally been called neuter clitic *ho*, used to refer to subordinate clauses or the unspecified pronouns *això* or *allò* ('this' or 'that'). However, we believe the main difference between these two forms (-*l*- vs. *ho*) is not one of gender as traditionally explained, but of definiteness or specificity, as its distribution in nominal predicates (2a, 2b) seem to indicate (Roca, 1992). Thus, the clitic *ho* is not available for definite masculine objects (2c). Crucially, this semantic distinction mapped into different morphological forms does not exist in Spanish since all those forms and functions map into the clitic *lo* in Spanish.

To sum up, in the first case, it is Spanish the language with an intricate semantic system that regulates the appearance of the DOM, a morphosyntactic feature nonexistent in Catalan; whereas in the second case, it is Catalan the language with a more complex morphology linked to certain semantic properties. Given these differences between Catalan and Spanish, we wonder whether Spanish-dominant early bilinguals will be able to fully acquire new functional categories and their appropriate semantic distribution in L2 Catalan, at the same time that they will have to *delearn* the use of DOM.

Sixty bilingual speakers with different degrees of language preference as measured by an exhaustive linguistic background questionnaire, the reported language use and a self-rating test completed an acceptability judgment task (AJT) and an oral production task. The AJT tested DOM in sentences with and without the *a* personal, with definite and indefinite animate objects (4 variables, 2 grammatical, 2 ungrammatical, 5 tokens each). The AJT also tested the knowledge of accusative clitics in masculine singular objects, in grammatical sentences with the clitic *el/l'* (proclisis) and *'l/-lo* (enclisis), and in ungrammatical sentences with the clitic *ho* or with no clitic (4 variables, 2 grammatical, 2 ungrammatical, 5 tokens each). This makes a total of 40 sentences targeting direct object expression in a 120-items test. The oral production task elicited sentences with direct objects in those same contexts.

Results indicated that Catalan-Spanish bilinguals, regardless of their language dominance or geographical area (metropolitan area of Barcelona or interior provinces of Catalonia), equally accepted and produced sentences with or without DOM, in definite or indefinite objects, displaying probabilistic use of DOM in Catalan, as previously documented in Spanish Heritage Speakers (Montrul & Bowles, 2009). On the other hand, only Catalan-dominant speakers, but not Spanish-dominant speakers were able to correctly reject ungrammatical sentences with the clitic *ho* referring to definite masculine objects.

Overall, these results showed convergence of Catalan with Spanish with respect to the DOM feature (cfr. Zapata, Sánchez & Toribio, 2005); whereas on the other hand, they also showed some degree of incomplete acquisition of certain morphological forms, since the L2 Catalan speakers failed to fully reclassify or create a new functional category.

Examples:

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| 1a. | En Joan buscava (*a) la Maria ahir a la tarda. | <i>Catalan</i> |
| | The Joan looked-for DOM the Maria yesterday in the evening | |
| 1b. | Juan buscaba *(a) María ayer por la tarde. | <i>Spanish</i> |
| | Juan looked-for DOM María yesterday in the evening | |
| | ‘John looked for Mary yesterday evening’ | |
| 1c. | Juan buscaba una niña ayer por la tarde. | <i>Spanish</i> |
| | Juan looked-for a girl yesterday in the evening | |
| | ‘John looked for a girl yesterday evening’ | |
| 2a. | En Joan és forner. En Joan ho és. | <i>Catalan</i> |
| | The Joan is baker. The Joan HO is. | |
| | ‘Joan is a baker. Joan is so.’ | |
| 2b. | En Joan és el forner del poble. En Joan l' és. | |
| | The Joan is the baker of-the town. The Joan L is | |
| | ‘Joan is the baker of the town. Joan is so.’ | |
| 2c. | Qui va rebre el regal? *Ho va rebre el Joan. (Correct form: el) | |
| | Who got the present? HO got the Joan | |
| | ‘Who got the present? Joan got it.’ | |

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