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CARMEN RUIZ-SÁNCHEZ*
Aquinas College
Book review

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ABSTRACT

EN Carmen Silva-Corvalán's *Bilingual language acquisition: Spanish and English in the first six years* explores the linguistic formation of her two grandsons from ages 0 to 6. This review discusses Silva-Corvalán's main findings and the issues related to the amount of exposure and the use of two languages in various linguistic domains in early bilingual acquisition. It also highlights the merits of this extensive and unique research project while at the same time pinpoints some methodological challenges faced by longitudinal studies such as this one.

Key words: BILINGUAL ACQUISITION, HERITAGE SPEAKERS, CROSS-LINGUISTIC INTERACTION, LANGUAGE CONTACT.

ES El libro *Bilingual language acquisition: Spanish and English in the first six years* de Carmen Silva-Corvalán explora la formación lingüística de sus dos nietos desde los 0 hasta los 6 años de edad. Esta reseña examina los resultados generales de la investigación de Silva-Corvalán y sus argumentos con respecto a la cantidad de exposición y uso de las dos lenguas en varias áreas lingüísticas en la adquisición bilingüe temprana. También se enfatiza el mérito de este original y detallado proyecto de investigación, así como se indican algunos de los desafíos metodológicos que conllevan estudios longitudinales como este.

Palabras clave: ADQUISICIÓN BILINGÜE, HABLANTES DE HERENCIA, INTERACCIÓN CROS-LINGÜÍSTICA, LENGUAS EN CONTACTO.

IT Nel volume *Bilingual language acquisition: Spanish and English in the first six years*, Carmen Silva-Corvalán analizza la formazione linguistica dei suoi due nipoti dalla nascita ai 6 anni. La presente recensione discute i risultati principali di quest'analisi e le questioni legate alla quantità di esposizione e all'uso di due lingue in diversi ambiti linguistici nell'acquisizione bilingue precoce. Si evidenziano inoltre i meriti di questo progetto di ricerca ampio e originale e, allo stesso tempo, si individuano alcune questioni metodologiche proprie di ricerche di questo tipo.

Parole chiave: ACQUISIZIONE BILINGUE, PARLANTI DI LINGUE EREDITARIE, INTERAZIONE CROSS-LINGUISTICA, LINGUE IN CONTATTO.

There has been broad interest and substantial research to learn how children acquire languages; however, investigations of how children simultaneously learn two languages have been less common. Silva-Corvalán's book, *Bilingual language acquisition: Spanish and English in the first six years*, on the examination of the emerging grammars of English and Spanish of two bilingual siblings makes a significant contribution to the study of early bilingual language development. Throughout the eight chapters in this work, published under Cambridge University Press's "Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact" series, Silva-Corvalán provides evidence of the direct effect of the amount of exposure to and use of two languages on bilingual speakers' level of proficiency in various grammatical domains. Her results demonstrate numerous consequences of language contact, and shed new light on the issue of the acquisition of Spanish by heritage speakers.

Chapter 1 contextualizes the purpose and relevance of Silva-Corvalán's study within the field of bilingual language acquisition. In this introductory chapter, Silva-Corvalán reviews models and issues relevant to bilingual first language acquisition: cross-linguistic interaction, language proficiency and

* Contact: cr001@aquinas.edu

dominance, and language input, to name a few. Although the author suggests a “theoretically eclectic” (p. 7) empirical approach, her findings are most consistent with a usage-based perspective, which she has often adopted in previous studies.

Chapter 2 describes the siblings’ social context: their two-language family and patterns of language use, and explains the data collection process and the analytical methods. The language data for this study come from recordings and diary notes regularly taken by Silva-Corvalán as her grandsons engaged in daily activities, and interacted in English, Spanish, or both in various natural contexts and with different interlocutors. This chapter includes information on how the children’s amount of exposure to and production of English and Spanish is calculated and used to determine the siblings’ different levels of proficiency in Spanish, their heritage and weaker language.

The next five chapters examine different aspects of the children’s grammars and lexicon while considering the effect of the amounts of exposure and use of English and Spanish and the relationship between the children’s language production and the input provided to them by adults. Each chapter compares the siblings’ linguistic behavior with those known for Spanish and English monolinguals, and looks for evidence of cross-linguistic interaction.

Chapter 3 is an overview of how the siblings develop negative structures, form questions, and improve narrative skills in English and Spanish in their first six years. Although similar paths and rates of development to those of monolingual speakers are identified for the siblings in those areas, cross-linguistic interaction differentiates the siblings’ language production from monolingual speech. Silva-Corvalán explains these differences in relation to the amount of exposure and use of the language at the time. The chapter emphasizes one of the benefits of language contact: how bilingual children acquire a metalinguistic awareness that is not found in monolingual speakers.

Chapter 4 focuses on the production of grammatical subjects in English, an overt subject language, and Spanish, a null subject language. The author carries out a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of the siblings’ production of overt subjects and examines whether they acquire the pragmatic properties of Spanish subjects. She observes that the children’s realization of subjects in Spanish seems affected by English, as evidenced in a greater amount of unjustified overt subjects, especially when exposure to Spanish becomes reduced. Regarding evidence of the siblings’ appropriate use of discourse-pragmatics properties, Silva-Corvalán finds no instance of pragmatic misuse at their earliest age period.

Chapter 5 investigates the position of the subject relative to the verb in both English and Spanish. The typological difference between the two languages allows the author to address again the question of cross-linguistic interaction and the effect of the amount of exposure to Spanish. As expected, the siblings’ English is not negatively affected by being in contact with Spanish, but a lower degree of exposure to Spanish results in an increase of preverbal subjects, due to influence from English. With regard to the semantic and discourse-pragmatic principles of Spanish subject placement, the siblings show some control at an early age but this control diminishes as their exposure to the categorical preverbal position of English subjects increases.

Chapter 6 tracks the siblings’ development of English and Spanish copulas. As the author points out, the bilingual child needs to acquire the semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic functions of the Spanish copulas while in English the child has the “simpler task of acquiring only one copula” (p.223). Silva-Corvalán tests the hypothesis that cross-linguistic interactions are more likely to happen when the phenomena in question are at the interface between two or more domains of a language (syntax-semantics, syntax-pragmatics) and when one language “offers multiple interpretations for superficially parallel syntactic construction” (p.220). Special attention is given to the use of copulas with predicate adjectives and in other variable contexts that make copula selection more susceptible to cross-linguistic interaction. The differing level of the siblings’ Spanish language proficiency proves to have an effect on their correct uses of the copulas. At an early age the siblings start using Spanish copulas in lexically specific and complementary contexts that are frequently found in adult input and that are less complex: identification and location expressions. Their learning of Spanish copulas later expands to a wider range of contexts that are more complex and less semantically transparent, as usage-based approaches would predict.

Chapter 7 deals with the development of tense, mood, and aspect markers in English and Spanish and provides additional support for a usage-based account of language development. Silva-Corvalán explores the issue of whether grammatical simplification in situations of societal bilingualism is due to incomplete acquisition or attrition of a heritage language. In both languages, verbs enter the children’s lexicon in different tenses, mainly present and imperative, mostly dictated by daily activities and the semantics of the verbs. The siblings’ development of other tenses continues successfully in English with no evidence of

influence of Spanish. Although, up to age 4, the siblings' developing knowledge of Spanish verb tenses is still comparable to that of monolinguals, differences occur when exposure to Spanish is reduced and influence from English becomes more evident, especially in the sibling with lower proficiency. A comparison of the children's performance with that of other bilingual children and adults from different social backgrounds reveals that processes of simplification and loss in adult bilingual Spanish are likely to be the consequence of incomplete acquisition of this language between the ages of 3 and 5, when more intensive exposure to English reduces the possibilities of using Spanish. The siblings' production of tenses is also explained in terms of complexity, frequency in the input, and communicative needs: tenses that are more complex and less frequent in the adults' input are acquired later.

Chapter 8 consists of final remarks, where Silva-Corvalán summarizes the major findings of her study and observes that in order to provide adequate explanations for language acquisition, multiple factors such as complexity, language dominance, proficiency, and quality and quantity of the input need to be considered. The cross-linguistic interactions found in the siblings' linguistic systems support Silva-Corvalán's "parallel structure hypothesis" (p. 356), according to which semantic and discourse-pragmatic components in a non-dominant language are more vulnerable to being affected by interlinguistic interactions. She closes with a discussion of similarities between developing bilingual children and heritage speakers, and the implications for theories of language contact and bilingual acquisition.

Although *Bilingual language acquisition: Spanish and English in the first six years* is an excellent piece of research, it is not without flaws, most of which the author mentions and addresses. The shortcomings are mostly methodological and typical of longitudinal studies. These include the limited generalization of the outcomes, the author's personal relationship with the subjects, and the challenging task of analyzing phenomena in which multiple semantic and discourse-pragmatic factors intersect (subject realization and copular choice in Spanish, for example). Another minor objection is that the author sometimes highlights that the children's grammars are native-like, whereas other times she recognizes that the siblings' Spanish is typical of second-to-third generation heritage speakers and is highly influenced by English.

Silva-Corvalán's unique investigation draws upon an impressive corpus of longitudinal data, systematically collected in a naturalistic setting during five years and meticulously examined, and enriches our understanding of the language development of bilingual children. Her detailed examination of complex linguistic domains that involve the acquisition of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors in Spanish provides valuable insights into Spanish language acquisition in general and deepens our knowledge of bilingual acquisition and language heritage phenomena in particular. Although the book will be of most interest to those working in the areas of bilingualism, language contact, and heritage language, it will also be useful to scholars in other linguistic disciplines such as language acquisition and sociolinguistic variation. The author's dedication and enthusiasm is evident throughout the book, as is her desire to underline bilingual speakers' accomplishments and similarities to monolingual speakers.

Carmen Ruiz-Sánchez, Aquinas Collegecr001@aquinas.edu

- EN** | **Carmen Ruiz-Sánchez** is associate professor of Spanish linguistics and the coordinator of the lower division courses at Aquinas College. She completed her Ph.D. in Hispanic linguistics at Indiana University. Before joining Aquinas College, she taught upper-division and graduate linguistic courses in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Michigan State University. Her research focuses on the sociolinguistic variation of the Spanish pronunciation in southern Spain and the Caribbean.
- ES** | **Carmen Ruiz-Sánchez** es profesora titular de lingüística hispana y coordinadora de los cursos de nivel básico en Aquinas College. Completó el doctorado en lingüística hispana en Indiana University. Antes de trabajar en Aquinas College, dio cursos de lingüística a nivel de pregrado y posgrado en Michigan State University. Sus investigaciones se centran en la variación sociolingüística de la pronunciación del español en el sur de España y el Caribe.
- IT** | **Carmen Ruiz-Sánchez** è Professoressa Associata di Linguistica Spagnola e coordinatrice dei corsi di laurea triennale presso l'Aquinas College. Ha conseguito un dottorato di ricerca in Linguistica ispano-americana presso l'Indiana University. Prima dell'attuale incarico, ha insegnato linguistica nel Dipartimento di Spagnolo e Portoghese della Michigan State University. La sua attività di ricerca si concentra sulla variazione sociolinguistica della pronuncia dello spagnolo nella Spagna del sud e nei Caraibi.