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SOME MORPHOSYNTACTIC PHENOMENA IN THE MIXED PERIOD OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN A POLISH-PORTUGUESE BILINGUAL CHILD: ACQUISITION OF CASE MARKERS

The paper presents a three-stage developmental sequence of a bilingual Polish-Portuguese child, with special focus on case marking acquisition. Our data show that code-switching as well as "mixing" must be regarded as part of the bilingual's pragmatic competence.

„Isto do Nominativo é a palavra-mãe?”
(„This Nominative thing: is it a mother-word?”)

Marta (11;2)

Introduction

We understand that – as Meisel (1988, p. 13) puts it – „the simultaneous acquisition of two (or more) „first languages” can be of particular interest for language acquisition studies. By analyzing the development of two linguistic competences in one individual, we may be capable of sorting out more easily to what extent the underlying logic of development is determined by the grammatical system to be acquired, or the particular way of human language processing as opposed to properties of the individual or of the communicative situation”.

In the present study we report on a corpus of simultaneous acquisition of Polish and Portuguese in Portugal by our daughter, Marta. We examined the child longitudinally between the ages of 1;0 and 4;6 and collected samples of her spontaneous language production (Batoréo, 1991).

The data in this article come from the corpus mentioned above and form a sample of the acquisition of Polish case marking in Marta's language productions between 1;9 and 3;0 (See the Appendix).

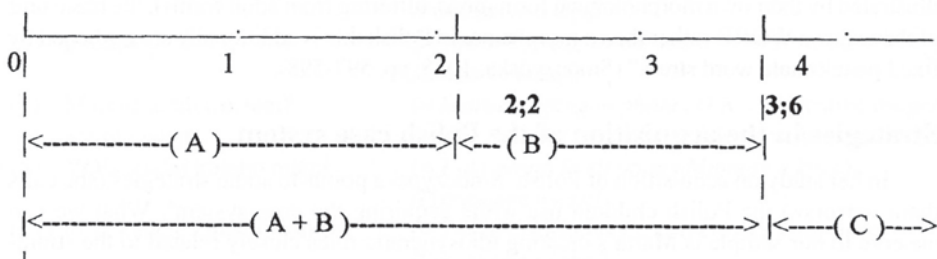
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- Polish utterance with one Portuguese lexical morpheme:
At 3;2 moze LAVAC glowe? ('may (she = I) wash (my) head?');
- Polish utterance with one Portuguese grammatical marker:
At 3;2 JÁ umylas glowe? ('have you already washed
your head (hair)?')

As we observe in these examples, Polish grammatical morphemes (bound morphemes as well as function words) co-occur with Portuguese lexical morphemes, while Portuguese grammatical morphemes co-occur with Polish lexical morphemes². The unique initial system the child had in the first stage undergoes a progressive bifurcation till a complete distinction of the two languages is achieved at about 3;6.

Then, the third stage starts with a new type of translation and with a marked growth of metalinguistic awareness. Code-switching appears as a function of the categories participant, topic and setting. The translations the child produces are no longer self-translations; they are made in a given (well language defined) setting and as a function of a given (well language defined) addressee.

THREE STAGES IN THE SIMULTANEOUS ACQUISITION OF TWO LANGUAGES – MARTA'S CASE



- A – FIRST STAGE: One „Luso-Polish” language system.
- B – SECOND STAGE: The transitory period – progressive bifurcation of one mixed language system into two separate languages; Portuguese, Polish and „Luso-Polish” utterances.
- A + B – Mixed period in language acquisition.
- C – THIRD STAGE: Post-mixed period in language acquisition.

The third year of age in language acquisition

The language sample used for the study of the acquisition of case markers covers the period of 1;9 till 3;0 and constitutes a sub-corpus of the longitudinal study referred to above. The third year is very significant in child language development and is considered to constitute a giant leap in structural development (Menyuk, 1988, p. 171). At this time Marta is in her mixed period of language acquisition, i.e., her utterances are either part of one or the other language, or of a mixed „Luso-Polish” system.

² Compare our results with those discussed by E. Lanza (1992).

The acquisition of Polish case marking

Studying the acquisition of case markers in a Portuguese-Polish bilingual child means, in fact, studying the acquisition of Polish case marking.

Portuguese, being a Romance language, is marked for gender and number on nouns; Portuguese nouns are not marked for Case but personal pronouns show some traces of Latin morphological case marking³, paralleling the situation in some other languages, e.g., in English, French or Spanish.

Polish, like other Slavic languages, represents an inflected (or fusional) type of language, in which single grammatical morphemes combine several functions, e.g., case, gender and number in noun forms. Nouns, adjectives and pronouns are marked for gender and inflected for case and number. As Smoczyńska (1985) in her study of acquisition of Polish puts it: „Even those forms which are functionally unmarked, e.g., nominative singular of nouns or infinitive of verbs, have specific endings, and a given ending explicitly specifies the grammatical category of the word. Moreover, in view of the rich variety of inflectional forms of a word, a given form occurs in opposition to the whole inflectional pattern, rather than to the basic form only. Therefore, morphological development should be conceived of as the acquisition of the ability to REPLACE grammatical morphemes according to the rules of the language, rather than the ability to ADD them to the basic forms when required. In consequence, although Polish children can very easily split a word form into a stem and an ending (as illustrated by their own morphological formations, differing from adult forms), the basic unit of the text is a WORD rather than a morpheme. In Polish this is additionally strengthened by fixed penultimate word stress” (Smoczyńska, 1985, pp. 597-598).

Strategies in the acquisition of the Polish case system

In her study on acquisition of Polish, Smoczyńska points to some strategies (she calls them «errors») the Polish children use while acquiring the case system⁴. What we can observe in our sample is Marta's creating idiosyncratic rules closely related to the strategies observed by Smoczyńska. As this author mentions: „Idiosyncratic rules are somewhat different than overgeneralizations. Idiosyncratic rules involve a simplified procedure invented by the child in order to cope with a diversity of rules. This is not identical to overextending a rule that exists in the adult language. On the other hand, an idiosyncratic rule is usually related to one of the existing rules, or else it can be based on a single linguistic form which serves as a model for overgeneralization” (Smoczyńska, 1985, p. 631). At age 2, Marta shows frequent Genitive marking which consists of using a correct adult form or overextending its usage to some other cases. On the other hand, she sometimes does not use the obligatory Genitive marking, using the Nominative instead. The Nominative can be overgeneralized for some other cases as well (See the Appendix).

³ Compare the following 1st person singular personal pronouns in European Portuguese: Nominative – *eu*, Genitive *meu* (masc) and *minha* (fem.), Dative = Accusative – *me/mim*, Instrumental – *comigo*, Locative – *mim*.

⁴ „In this place, however, I would like to introduce the distinction between a set of rules and the exceptions to these rules in order to make the acquisition of Slavic languages more easily understood and a little bit amazing. We shall therefore try to classify particular types of errors in terms of the relation between children's productions and the norms of the language. The simplest kind of error, very common with English speaking children, but considerably less so with Polish children, is that of omitting a grammatical morpheme in an obligatory context. The opposite kind of error is overmaking. Still another type consists of using correct adult forms in improper contexts” (Smoczyńska, 1985: 621).

For example (Portuguese markers in block letters):

– Nominative for Genitive usage:

- (1) tata sisi nie ma (= *There is no Daddy's pee*) /Possessive usage/
 (2) mama (CA)FÉ (= *Mummy's coffee*) /Possessive usage/
 (12) Marta nie ma, mamusia, Marta nie ma
 (= *Marta is not here, Mummy! Marta is not here!*)
 /Genitive in negation/

– Nominative for other markers:

- (7) Chlebek COM mas(l)o (= *Bread (with) and butter*)
 /Nominative for Instrumental/
 (8) VOu siadaj kolano mami (= *I am going to sit on my Mummy's knee*)
 /Nominative for Locative/
 (12) Marta nie ma, mamusia! Marta nie ma
 (= *Marta is not here, Mummy! Marta is not here!*)
 /Nominative instead of Vocative/

– Correct (adult) Genitive marking:

- (3) mami i/e tati (= *Mummy's and Daddy's, e.g. slippers*)
 /Possessive usage/
 (4) pokoju (= *Are we going to the room? / is it in the room?*)
 /Locative usage/
 (5) Ma(r)ta telefonu, sim? (= *Marta is going to phone, O.K.?*) /Locative usage/
 (6) nie ma wagi (= *The balance is not here*) /Genitive in negation/
 (8) VOu siadaj kolano mami (= *I am going to sit on my Mummy's knee*)
 /Possessive usage/
 (11) to sa kaptie tatusi i mamusi (= *These are Mummy's and Daddy's slippers*)
 /Possessive usage⁵

– Genitive replacing other cases:

- (9) Dá ISSO Marty (= *Give it to Marta*) /Genitive for Dative/
 (10) Marta SENTA AQUI COM jasia, tak? (= *Marta is going to sit here with (her) pillow, yes?*)
 /Genitive for Instrumental (Comitative usage)/

We can observe that in the first and in the third groups, i.e., where the Nominative is used for Genitive and where the Genitive is correctly marked, hardly any mixing can be noticed. In the other two groups, however, where the Nominative and the Genitive stand for other cases, the morphosyntactical construction is basically Portuguese⁶.

⁵ There are two Genitive markers used in this utterance and only one of them is used in a correct way (mamusi). The other one (tatusi instead of correct «tatusia») is an example of a Genitive feminine form replacing a Genitive masculine form.

⁶ Suggesting an alternative analysis, following Slobin's Operating Principle „pay attention to the endings”, Isabel Hub Faria (personal communication) proposes that the ending [i] may be treated from the point of view of phonetic, morphological and functional prominence rather than as Case usage generalization.

The overgeneralization idiosyncratic rule Marta systematically uses in her third year makes her replace other cases by marking nouns in the Nominative and the Genitive cases, the only ones she uses at that time. The Genitive case can be substituted by the Nominative (ex. 1, 2 and 12), used in an adult way (ex. 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 11) or can replace other cases: Dative (ex. 9) or Instrumental (ex. 10). Neither correct usage of the Dative preceding the replacing by the Genitive nor the early mastery of grammatical gender in the singular as reported by Smoczyńska were found as expected. What we can observe in Marta's utterances is a sort of „inflectional imperialism”, i.e., a situation in which „the child seizes upon one ending for a given case and uses it for all nouns irrespective of their gender” (Smoczyńska, 1985, pp. 644-645)⁷. The „consistent and clear criteria” of the input in Polish children language acquisition referred to by Smoczyńska is not observed in the case of Marta. Since her Polish language input is limited (having only one person – her mother – as its source), Marta seems to find it impossible to discover the criteria of grammatical case in Polish in the same time and way as her Polish peers do. Her case acquisition resembles that of the acquisition of gender in Russian children, though the inconsistency in the Russian input is due to systemic reasons, whereas in Marta's case it is due to pragmatic and sociolinguistic reasons. In both cases, though, the limitation of the input is responsible for the „morphological imperialism” we can observe.

The importance of the linguistic input in grammar acquisition had been widely discussed. There is not much disagreement about the fact that „the way caretakers talk and the circumstances under which they talk affect learning”. There is a graded view of the influence of the linguistic environment, the controversy residing „in the extent to which the internal state of the child intervenes and influences the issue” (Ingram, 1989, p. 506). The studies on the matter highlight two distinct views on the role of adult speech in the child's acquisition: some of them „assign importance to simplified speech”, whereas others „emphasize the importance of hearing a range of constructions”, showing that „the adult speech can contribute if the constructions used contain closed class items in prominent positions (Ingram, 1989, p. 510). In the literature concerning the language acquisition by bilinguals much importance has been given to limitations in the linguistic input (Lanza, 1992).

Marta's initial replacing of the expected case marking in Polish by the Nominative case can be explained in terms of the child's language developmental sequence. As stated before, the third year is a mixed period, in that the child can use a morphosyntactic language frame of one language, e.g. Portuguese, and fill it with the lexical material of the other tongue, e.g. Polish (or vice versa). In example (7) *Chlebek COM mas(ł)o* (= Bread (with) and butter), only the lexical material is Polish, «chlebek» – diminutive of «bread» and «masło» – butter), whereas the connective *COM* (Pt. «with») and the Nominative case usage (instead of the correct adult Polish «z masłem» comitative usage and Instrumental case marker) make part of the Portuguese morphosyntactical frame. This is the way the child refers to bread and butter when she is 2;2. Ten months later, when she is 3;0, Marta's

⁷ Cf. Slobin (1966, 1971) and Smoczyńska (1985: 618-620, 626, 645-646). Cf. also: „(...) (Such) an inconsistent input makes it possible for the Russian child to discover the criteria of grammatical gender, while Polish children can tolerate the limited amount of inconsistency to which they are exposed, simply regularizing irregular instances according to the tripartite gender distinction. Early acquisition of gender in Polish shows that the child is able to learn rules which are based on the totally arbitrary criteria, provided these criteria are consistent and clear enough to be discovered, and that selecting one salient (or phonetically unique) ending is only a strategy that Russian children apply when faced with the impossibility of discovering adult criteria” (Smoczyńska, 1985: 645-646).

one „Luso-Polish” language system gives partially way to two different language systems. There are still mixed utterances but they are mixed now in a different way. The mixed systemic utterances in which the syntax *was* from one language and the lexicon from the other give way to „monolithic” constructions in which both syntax and lexicon come from the same language. Occasionally, some pragmatical strategies make the child use some surface „mixing” as in a new version of a „bread and butter” example: (13) Chlebek z maselkiem fechado, where the initially mixed (at 2;2) chlebek com mas(l)o gives way (at 3;0) to the Polish chlebek z maselkiem. The child does not know how to refer to a „sandwich” situation, in which there are two slices of bread with some butter „closed” in between, giving origin to a pragmatical Portuguese solution FECHADO (= closed). This is how in only ten months time a bilingual child can build up her language system(s).

Case marking and semantics

Particular subsystems of grammar, as a Case system for example, can be linked to the child’s expression of agentivity and control, as suggested by Slobin for Russian (1985) and shown by the Case inflected personal pronouns in child’s usage for American English in Budwig (1989) and for European Portuguese in Faria (1992). „In particular, case markers and modal forms have been mentioned to co-occur with various degrees or kinds of agentivity and control” (Budwig, 1989, p. 267). The studies mentioned above stress the role that the Genitive marking, especially with Possessive usage, plays in the second and third year in the construction of the child’s reference system.

Slobin’s Operating Principles – some remarks

Commenting on Slobin’s Operating Principles (1973, 1985), Smoczyńska (1985) states that Slobin is not clear about what he considers innate: „He [Slobin] qualifies the Operating Principles as something which every child brings to bear on the problem of Language Acquisition (1973, p. 197) – as something preexisting with respect to the process of acquisition” (Smoczyńska, 1985, p. 677). We agree with Smoczyńska when she suggests that: „it seems simpler to propose that the Operational Principles the child is obeying are nothing else than the outcome of his LINGUISTIC EXPERIENCE. Hence, they are the generalizations about a particular language he [the child] has made on the basis of prior learning rather than the effect of testing preexisting principles against the specific data. Therefore, the claim is that all the Operating Principles are totally LANGUAGE SPECIFIC, as they are built upon the child’s experience with a particular language. Some strategies are universal in the sense that they are present in the acquisition of any language, e.g., „Avoid exceptions” (or better, „Look for regularities and ignore the remainder”). We should, however, take into account the fact that every language is more regular than irregular, and also that „looking for irregularities” is the only economical way to build any kind of knowledge. It is a strategy which is used by the child in many other domains of learning and a long time before he starts to speak „ (Smoczyńska, 1985, pp. 677-678). „As far as early language is concerned, we should also take into account the fact that most of the exchanges occurring between the child and the adult refer to ongoing activities and objects present in the situation. At this stage, utterances cannot be ambiguous since their meanings can be easily discovered from the situation itself, and this is in fact what both child and adult do without paying much attention to grammatical markers

present in utterances. At this stage grammatical markers are quite superfluous since successful communication could be achieved as well if they were not used at all" (Smoczyńska, 1985, pp. 678-679).

Nevertheless, the careful analysis of our bilingual child sample makes us reflect on Smoczyńska's claims. It is possible to look at the data the way Smoczyńska suggests in the initial approach to first language acquisition. This is probably not the case when the acquisition of language by bilinguals is considered. In our study, Marta pays attention to those endings that are important to her from a functional point of view, i.e., enable her to achieve successful communication. If she needs to mark an Instrumental usage of a noun (example 7) and she can "choose" between a weaker morphosyntactic Portuguese scheme (preposition COM ('with') and a zero ending marking of the noun) on the one hand and a stronger Polish marking that involves a preposition and a case marking on the other, she would choose the weaker one. It looks as if she was not interested in marking the ending of the words but, in fact, *she is not interested in them only when she does not need them*, having other simpler strategies at hand.

Slobin's strategies are reflected in the order in which various markers may be acquired but they do not explain the process by which morphophonological and morphosyntactical information is stored in memory. Several attempts have been made of such explanations. In 1978, using the computer analogue, MacWhinney suggests that learning takes place by an economical application of three ordered devices, i.e., learning by rote, by analogy and by combination. Learning by rote in Marta's case does not seem to precede the other two types of learning. The analytical 'bread and butter' version at 2;2 (ex. 7) is not preceded by a memorized adult-like version with correctly marked cases. On the contrary, the analytical non-marked version precedes the synthetic one (ex. 13) that appears at 3;0 and comes up as the result of the child's creative language constructing capacity.

Language capacity

Finally, we would like to mention that some of the characteristics of the acquisition of Case markers we have studied here seem to suggest some diachronic processes in the history of languages. Our analysis may also confirm the relation put in evidence by Slobin (1973, 1977, 1985, etc.), according to which linguistic aspects that are the most susceptible to historical change are, in fact, more difficult to acquire. From a diachronic point of view, we have evidence that the Latin suffixal case system was reduced and across Romance languages its functions were taken over by other markers, such as prepositions, and a (more) fixed word order. Apparently, the acquisition of language in the case of our bilingual child by age three undergoes analogous changes: the suffixal case system, which is partially taken over by prepositions, is reduced to the more salient cases (basically to the Polish Nominative and Genitive). This prominence is mainly functional, as in the case of the Genitive, frequently marked for self reference (Possessive). Nevertheless, the Nominative is not functionally marked, as Marta herself gets the point some years later saying: "Isto do Nominativo é a palavra-mãe?" (This Nominative thing: is it a mother-word?).

Final remarks

In this study we attempted to present a three-stage developmental sequence of a bilingual Polish-Portuguese child, with special focus on case marking acquisition. Our data

show that code-switching as well as “mixing” must be regarded as part of the bilingual’s pragmatic competence. Theoretically, though, the most interesting question is whether the human “language making capacity” suggested by Slobin in 1985, could allow the bilingual individual to separate the two simultaneously acquired grammatical systems from early on, without even going through a phase of a common nucleus.

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Appendix

Examples of the Acquisition of Case Markers in a bilingual Polish – Portuguese child from 1;9 to 3;0

(Obs. Pol. – Polish morphemes, Pt. – Portuguese morphemes)

(1) at 1;9

tata	sis	nie ma
(Pol) <i>daddy</i>	(Pol/Pt) <i>pee</i>	(Pol) <i>there is not</i>
= <i>There is no daddy's pee</i> (or: <i>He has not made a pee, yet</i>)		

(2) at 1;9

mama	(ca)fé
(Pol) <i>mummy</i>	(Pt) <i>coffee</i>
Nom.	Nom.
= <i>Mummy's coffee</i> (Gen)	

(3) at 1;9

mami	i/(e)	tati
(Pol) <i>Mummy's</i>	(Pol)/(Pt) <i>and</i>	(Pol) <i>Daddy's</i>
Gen.		Gen.
= <i>Mummy's and Daddy's</i>		

(4) At 2;0

pokoju?
 (Pol) *(in the /to the) room?*
 Gen. or Loc.
 = *Are we going to the room? / Is it going in the room?, etc.*

(5) At 2;0

Ma:ta	telefonu,	sim?
(Pol./Pt) <i>Marta</i> (Pol.)	<i>(is going to the) telephone</i> (Pt) <i>yes?</i>	
	Gen.	
= <i>Marta is going to the phone, O. K.?! / May I phone?</i>		

(6) At 2;2

Nie ma	wagi
(Pol) <i>There isn't</i>	(Pol) <i>balance</i>
	Gen.
= <i>The balance is not here</i>	

(7) At 2;3

Chlebek	com	mas(l)o
(Pol) <i>bread</i>	(Pt) <i>with</i>	(Pol) <i>butter</i>
diminut. Nom.		Nom.
= <i>Bread and butter</i>		

(8) At 2;3

You	siadaj	kolano	mami
(Pt) <i>I'm going to</i>	(Pol) <i>sit!</i>	(Pol) <i>knee</i>	(Pol) <i>Mummy's</i>
	Imperat.	Nom.	Gen.

= *I'm going to sit on my Mummy's knee*
Gen. Loc.

(9) At 2;3

Dá	isso	Marty
(Pt) <i>Give</i>	(Pt) <i>it</i>	(Pol) <i>Marty</i>
		Gen.

= *Give it to Marta* Dat.

(10) At 2;3

Marta	senta	aqui	com	jasia,
(Pol)/(Pt) <i>Marta</i>	(Pt) <i>sit!</i>	(Pt) <i>here</i>	(Pt) <i>with</i>	(Pol) <i>small</i>

tak?
pillow (Pol) *sim?*
Gen.

= *Marta (is going) to sit here with her pillow, O. K?*
Instr.

(11) At 2;5

To	sa	kapcie	tatusi
(Pol) <i>These</i>	(Pol) <i>are</i>	(Pol) <i>slippers</i>	(Pol) <i>Daddy's</i>
			Gen. fem.

i mamusi
(Pol)/(Pt) *and Mummy's*
Gen. fem.

= *These are Daddy's and Mummy's slippers*
Gen. masc. Gen fem.

(12) At 2;5

Marta	nie ma,	mamusia,	Marta
(Pol)/(Pt) <i>Marta</i>	(Pol) <i>não há</i>	(Pol) <i>Mummy</i>	(Pol)/(Pt) <i>Marta</i>
Nom.		Nom.	Nom.

nie ma
(Pol) *não há*
= *Marta is not here, Mummy! Marta is not here!*
Gen. Voc. Gen.

(13) At 3;0

Chlebek	z	maselkiem	fechado
(Pol) <i>bread</i>	(Pol) <i>with</i>	(Pol) <i>butter</i>	(Pt) <i>closed</i>
dimin.		Instr. dimin.	

= *A sandwich of bread and butter*