Null subjects and objects in monolingual and bilingual children: Evidence from Russian and Hebrew

Galina Gordishevsky[1], Natasha Dvorina[2], Natalia Meir[2]
[1]Ben-Gurion University, Beer-Sheba, Israel. [2]Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

Abstract

The study assessed the potential interaction between the two languages in bilinguals' choice of null and overt pronouns, recognizing the vulnerability of phenomena at interfaces, as per the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace, 2011). Hebrew syntactically licenses first- and second-person null subjects, while null objects and third-person null subjects are discourse-bound (Landau, 2018). On the other hand, Russian is a discourse-drop language (Franks, 1995).

We recruited 66 children aged 4;2-8;0 and 40 adults, including bilingual Russian-Hebrew children, monolingual Russian- and Hebrew-speaking child and adult controls. The bilingual children were tested in both languages, their heritage language, Russian, and the societal language, Hebrew. The results showed that the bilinguals had lower morpho-syntactic abilities than both monolingual child control groups, as indexed via LITMUS Sentence Repetition Tasks (Marinis & Armon-Lotem, 2015). As a group, bilinguals were more dominant in Russian. Pronoun elicitation tasks tested third-person subject and object pronouns using pictures (Subject prompt: *The boy is wet because…* Target: *he/∅ jumped into the puddle*; Object prompt: *The baby is laughing because…* Target: *the father is tickling him/∅*).

First, cross-linguistic differences between subject and object drop in adult controls were noted: both monolingual adult groups used null subjects, yet to different extents (Russian: 97%; Hebrew: 18%), whereas no null objects were observed. Second, Hebrew-speaking monolingual children exhibited adult-like use of subject and object pro-drop, whereas Russian-speaking monolinguals were more likely to resort to overt pronouns in the subject position compared to adults. Third, for subject-drop, bilingual children paired up with monolingual child controls in Hebrew, yet differed from Russian-speaking controls. For object drop, all groups converged (Figure 1). Among bilingual children, age was associated with subject drop in both languages.

To conclude, not only might bilingual children overuse overt pronominal subjects, but monolingual children might also resort to overt pronouns when adults choose null elements. Thus, the data do not support the cross-linguistic influence account, as the differences were observed in the children's more proficient Russian rather than Hebrew. Both monolingual and bilingual children may experience a protracted development in null-vs.-overt pronoun acquisition (Iraola Azpiroz et al., 2017).

Figure 1. Distribution of subject and object forms in Russian and Hebrew
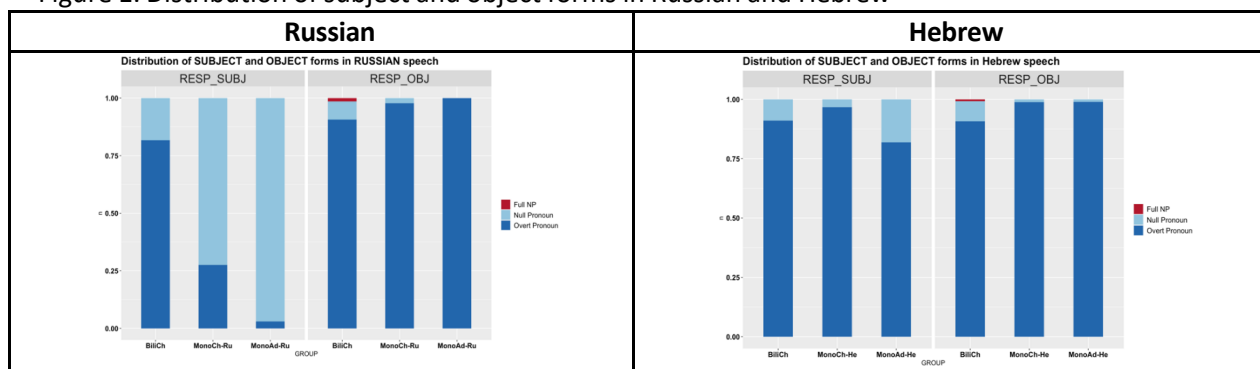
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