Title: Dialect Density in Bilingual Puerto Rican Spanish-English Speaking Children

Abstract

Between-language interaction in bilingual phonological acquisition has been well-documented in the literature (e.g., Fabiano-Smith & Goldstein, 2010; Fabiano-Smith & Barlow, 2009; Kehoe, Lló, & Rakow, 2001, and Paradis, 2001). Identifying the site of interaction between the two languages of typically-developing children could inform theories of bilingual language acquisition as well as contribute to our knowledge of how disorder might present itself in a system that manages two languages. Puerto Rican Spanish provides a unique opportunity to examine between-language interaction because it contrasts heavily with English. Puerto Rican Spanish is a radical dialect which modifies final consonants (e.g., deletion of final /s/) and multiple vibrant sounds, such as the Spanish trill (Guitart, 1996). It is possible that Puerto-Rican Spanish-English bilingual children exhibit decreased use of dialect features in Spanish due to the presence of English, which would encourage, for example, the use of final /s/.

The research questions motivating the current study were: (1) Are the bilingual children that use more dialect features more advanced Spanish-speakers? (2) Is there evidence for between-language interaction if bilingual children don’t use as many dialect features? and (3) Do bilingual children prefer to use dialect features to aid in production of more difficult sounds of a language?

Seven monolingual Puerto Rican Spanish-speaking children and 7 bilingual Puerto Rican Spanish-English speaking children, ages 5-6, were included in the current study. Spanish single word samples were collected from each child using the phonology subtest of the Bilingual English-Spanish Assessment (BESA) (Peña, Gutierrez-Clellen, Iglesias, Goldstein, & Bedore, in development). Single word samples were phonetically transcribed and common features of Puerto Rican Spanish were taken from Goldstein (2001). Occurrence of dialect features were organized by (1) dialect density and (2) type of dialect feature used.

Results indicated that monolinguals and bilinguals exhibited similar dialect density, but differed on the types of dialect features used. Evidence for phonological transfer was also observed. Findings are discussed within the theoretical framework of the Dual Systems Model (Paradis, 2001) of language acquisition in bilingual children. By determining how, and to what extent, the two languages of bilingual children interact, we will be able to separate language difference from language disorder in phonological acquisition. This distinction ultimately will prevent the overdiagnosis of phonological disorders in the bilingual population.