
Code-switching in bilingual Spanish-Catalan children with Specific Language Impairment

Eva Aguilar-Mediavilla*^{†1}, Lucia Buil-Legaz*¹, Josep Pérez-Castelló*¹, Raül López-Penadés*¹, and Daniel Adrover-Roig*¹

¹Universitat de les Illes Balears (UIB) – Edif. Beatriu de Pinós C/ Valldemossa, km. 7,5 07122 Palma de Mallorca (Spain), Spain

Abstract

Bilingualism is nowadays a common condition, being most native children, in Spanish-Catalan communities, simultaneous bilinguals. These children experience a similar amount of exposure to both languages. As regards linguistic characteristics, Spanish and Catalan are Romance languages with a very similar morphosyntax and a high degree of correspondence, which has been estimated to be 76% (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2013).

Due to these reasons, it is usual for adults to switch from one language to the other during a conversation. In very small children, it is also very usual to observe language mixing with the same person and/or in the same communicative setting. This conforms a specific and very interesting bilingual context to study code-switching (alternate languages between sentences in a conversation) and code-mixing (alternate languages between words in the same sentence) in a native and balanced bilingual sample of children with language difficulties (Tay, 1989). To date, very few studies have attempted to do so (for instance see Gutiérrez-Clellen, Simon & Erikson, 2009) and none has been carried out with bilingual Spanish-Catalan children with SLI.

In the present work, we aimed to know if bilingual Spanish-Catalan children with language difficulties show different code-switching and code-mixing patterns than children without language difficulties. We departed from Gutiérrez-Clellen, Simon and Erikson (2009) who did not report a differential pattern of code-switching in bilingual unbalanced English-Spanish 6-year old children. It is worthy of note however that in their study, language dominance did play a role in code-switching being the switches from the non-dominant language to the dominant one. Given that children in our study were balanced Spanish-Catalan bilinguals, we do not expect code-switching related to language-dominance and we do not predict a differential pattern of code-switching between groups. However, given that Spanish and Catalan are both Romance languages, both groups might differ in terms of their language mixing, as a result of an inhibitory deficit in bilingual children with SLI that would not be present in their bilingual age-matched peers (see Genesee, Paradis & Crago, 2004). This inhibitory deficit would only be evident with languages involving a high degree of correspondence, as it is the case of Spanish-Catalan. We also expect language mixing in bilingual children with SLI to attenuate over time because of grammatical improvement.

In order to test this hypothesis, we followed 19 Spanish-Catalan bilingual children with

*Speaker

[†]Corresponding author: eva.aguilar@uib.es

SLI from 8 to 12 years old. All children in the study group fulfilled the established criteria for diagnosing children with SLI at 5;6 years (Leonard, 1998; Stark & Tallal, 1981). Children with SLI were paired with 19 age-matched controls, who were also Spanish-Catalan bilinguals.

Children were audio recorded while they produced an oral narrative task: a story telling task from 'Frog, where are you?' (Mayer, 1969). The language of assessment during the task was chosen by the children and the interviewer adapted his/her language according to the children's preferences.

Some examples of SLI productions with code-mixing and code-switching were:

(1) *CHI: el nen i el ca estan mirant la rana i la seva mare li ha dit que s'**acostés** (Catalan: ficar al llit) i la rana mentre estaven dormint ha anat a sa seva casa. [The child and the dog were looking at the frog and his mother has said him that s'**acostés** (English: went to bed) and the frog, while they were sleeping, went home].

%lang: cat

*CHI: xxx buscaron por todo pero no la encontraron [= they searched everywhere but they did not find her].

%lang: spa

Some examples of age controls' productions with code-mixing or code-switching were:

(2) *CHI: Después no s'havien enterat que n'hi havia un **montón** [Catalan: munt] d'abelles. [Then, they did not notice that there were a **montón** (English: a lot of) bees].

In the present work, we discuss both code-mixing and code-switching in SLI as compared to age-matched peers in light of current theories of bilingualism and language impairment. Finally, we draw several clinical considerations for educational settings in light of the observed results.

References

- Genesee, F., Paradis, J., Crago, M.B. (2004). *Dual Language Development & Disorders: A Handbook on Bilingualism & Second Language Learning*. Baltimore, Maryland: Brookes.
- Gutiérrez Clellen V.F., Cerejido, G.S. (2009). Codeswitching in bilingual children with Specific Language Impairment. *International Journal of Bilingualism*.
- Leonard, L. (1998). *Children with specific language impairment*. Massachusetts: MIT Press (MA).
- Lewis, P., Simons, G., & Fennig, C. (2013). *Ethnologue*. Dallas: SIL International.
- Mayer, M. *Frog, where are you?*. New York, NY: 1969.
- Stark, R.E., & Tallal, P. (1981). Selection of Children with Specific Language Deficits. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*, 46(2), 114–122.
- Tay, M.W.J. (1989). Code switching and code mixing as a communicative strategy in multilingual discourse. *World Englishes*, 8(3), 407–417.