SER and ESTAR in coding permanent vs temporal properties. A study in early bilingual and trilingual acquisition. Analizing four child-internal variables: number of L1s, language dominance, language combination and age

In Spanish, some adjectives can be accompanied by either SER or ESTAR (1), whereas there seem to be a large group that accept both (2):

(1) a. Pedro es/*está astuto b. María está/*es cansada
(2) a. Las ranas son verdes b. El semáforo está en verde

In either way, while the use of SER seems to convey a permanent/intrinsic property of the subject, ESTAR adds a temporal/accidental reading of the quality. In early acquisition, monolinguals seem to acquire the use of SER and ESTAR with ease (cf. Holtheuer 2009 among many others), whereas research on early Spanish-English/German bilingualism shows that the asymmetry between the Romance and the Germanic language(s) affects negatively the acquisition of SER and ESTAR (cf. Sera 1992, Silva-Corvalán & Montanari 2008, Arnaus Gil 2013). A longitudinal study on Spanish copula verbs in early trilingualism Spanish-Catalan-German carried out in Arnaus Gil (2015) and Arnaus Gil & Müller (2015) has shown positive effects of Catalan towards the acquisition of Spanish SER and ESTAR due to the fact that Catalan also presents two copulas that have similar distributions as their Spanish counterparts. The purpose of our study is (i) to examine the use of <copula+adjective> in early bilingual and trilingual children with different language combinations where both SER and ESTAR are allowed (i.e. by using one or the other copula verb, an intrinsic or temporal property is conveyed) and (ii) to investigate whether the number of L1s the child acquires, language dominance, age or language combination plays a role in the children’s output of SER and ESTAR. Based on the literature, we hypothesize that the trilingual children who acquire Spanish, Catalan and another L1 will benefit from the two Romance languages for both having dual copula systems. Moreover, we assume that they will perform better than Spanish-German/English bilinguals.

We will present results from a cross-sectional study carried out in bilingual institutions in Spain and Germany with thirty-five children (14 bilingual Spanish-German/French and 21 trilingual Spanish-German/French-Catalan/English), aged between 3;0 and 7;0. We used the PPVT (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Dunn & Dunn 2007) to establish the language dominance and we used an elicitation task based on Schmitt & Miller (2007) to test whether children make use of the coded information in SER and ESTAR to determine the permanent or temporal properties, respectively. The preliminary results indicate that children generally have more problems when coding intrinsic properties with SER and show targetlike patterns with ESTAR, independently of (i) language dominance (graph 1), (ii) age, (iii) number of languages acquired and (iv) language combination. These results contrast with the empirical studies on monolingual acquisition of SER and ESTAR and presents further evidence for the difficulties in early bi- and trilingualism with SER-contexts.
Graph 1. Spanish-French/German bilinguals and trilinguals Spanish-French/German-x: Language dominance

References


Sera, M.D. 1992. To be or to be. En Journal of Memory and Language 31, 408-427.