Cross-linguistic influence in bilingual acquisition: How English can become a V2 language

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This paper presents data from a balanced Norwegian-English bilingual girl, Emma, aged 2;7-2;10, who appears to transfer V2 from Norwegian into English. Norwegian is a V2 language and generally displays V-to-C movement in main clauses. English, on the other hand, is a residual V2 language, in which only auxiliaries and the copula undergo verb movement, and only in certain contexts. Monolingual Norwegian children have been found to acquire V2 very early in all of these contexts (cf. Westergaard 2009). In contrast, monolingual English-speaking children occasionally fail to move finite auxiliaries, but overgeneralized movement of finite main verbs is hardly ever attested.

The bilingual child investigated in this study appears to master V2 in Norwegian at the same level of competence as her monolingual Norwegian peers. However, in Emma’s English, we see verb movement patterns that are not attested in monolingual English acquisition: (i) In non-subject initial matrix clauses, she produces subject-verb inversion 26.3% of the time (in 20/76 instances), (1); (ii) We find movement of main verbs across negation 21.8% of the time, (2) (iii): The auxiliary gonna is moved across negation in 15 out of 16 cases, (3); and (iv) She employs subject-verb inversion with finite main verbs in yes/no-questions in 10 out her 12 yes/no-question contexts requiring do-insertion, (4).

As these types of patterns are hardly ever attested in monolingual English-speaking children, it seems clear that they are the result of transfer from Norwegian into English. At first sight, this type of transfer might seem surprising. Emma appears to be transferring a less economical construction (i.e. V2) into a language that displays a more economical option (no verb movement). However, we argue that various factors make such transfer plausible and even economical. First of all, according to Henry and Tangney (1999) a language in which all verbs undergo verb movement is ‘simpler’ than a language in which some verbs move and some do not. Thus, one could claim that the verb movement pattern in Norwegian should be easier than that of English, since all verbs behave the same way syntactically. Although the ‘inconsistency’ in English does not appear to cause problems for monolingual English-speaking children, in a bilingual context, this area of grammar may become vulnerable. Moreover, English and Norwegian display certain superficial structural similarities with respect to verb placement of auxiliaries. Hulk & Müller (2000, 2001) have proposed that such superficial structural overlap between a bilingual’s two languages may lead to cross-linguistic influence. We here argue that the strong cues for generalized main clause verb movement in Norwegian enhance the cues for verb movement in English in the bilingual context. The English system in itself presents ambiguous cues concerning verb placement, while the cues in Norwegian are very consistent. Emma therefore partially and temporarily ‘borrows’ full V2 from Norwegian as a relief strategy (Müller 1998) at a stage when English verb placement (including the operation of do-support) is not yet fully acquired.
Workshop 11: Syntactic Issues in Language Acquisition

(1) Now **throw I** it  
    Target: ‘Now I throw it’/‘Now I’m throwing it’

(2) I **hurt not** this knee now  
    Target: ‘I’m not hurting this knee now.’

(3) The teletubby **gonna not** sleep in there more  
    Target: ‘The teletubby is not gonna sleep in there anymore.’

(4) **Drive daddy** me to barnehage?  
    Target: ‘Will daddy drive me to the kindergarten?’

Selected references