Hard to Keep Your Heritage: Language Attrition in Spanish-English Bilingual Preschoolers Over a Single Year

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Introduction

- Heritage language attrition is frequently observed when children are raised in a different majority culture (Portes & Schauffler, 1994).
- Second language outcomes of immigrant families continue to be referred to as receptive bilinguals. That is, they have greater receptive language skills than expressive language skills (Ribot, Hoff, & Burridge, 2018).
- Ribot and colleagues noted Spanish-English bilingual children’s tendency to code-switch to English when addressed in Spanish in school and home settings (Ribot et al., 2016).
- The longer immigrant families reside in the U.S., the more likely they are to experience language attrition due to language assimilation, regardless of socio economic status (SES) (Portes & Schauffler, 1994). Such beliefs and social pressures inevitably lead to attrition of heritage languages.
- The current study investigated code-switched events in Spanish-English language samples of mother-child dyads to better understand attrition of heritage languages in the United States. Ramifications for maintaining heritage languages will be discussed.

Methods and Materials

- Participants: 24 typically-developing Spanish-English bilingual children (13F, 11M) and their bilingual caregivers from a larger group followed by Hoff and colleagues participated in the present study (e.g., Hoff, Core, Place, Rumiche, Señor & Parra, 2012).
- All participating children were born in the United States, resided in South Florida, and came from middle-class homes.
- The children’s average proportion of English exposure in the home was 37.87% (range = 0-90%).
- All bilingual caregivers were native, fluent Spanish speakers. Native countries included Colombia (12), Peru (4), Puerto Rico (3), and other Spanish-speaking countries.

Procedure:

- Bilingual children and their caregivers were recorded during a 10-minute play or joint book reading interaction.
- Children were evaluated at 30 months, 36 months, and 42 months.
- Children and their caregivers were seen twice at each of the three ages, and were instructed to either speak only in English or Spanish for one visit, and the other language for the second visit.

Data Collection and Analysis:

- All utterances were transcribed using CHAT in the Child Language Analysis (CLAN) program.
- Each word produced by the child participants was coded as English or Spanish and marked as code-switched if produced in a language different from what the mother used.
- Frequency of code-switches from English to Spanish and from Spanish to English were calculated.
- Code switches were measured in percent of the child language tokens that were in utterances containing codeswitching.
- Results were compared between the participant’s three visits (at 30, 36, and 42 months).

Results

- Mothers rarely code-switched when instructed to use either English or Spanish (<2% English-to-Spanish; <1% Spanish-to-English).
- Code Switches to English: There was a marked rise in children’s responses in English when mothers spoke to them in Spanish, particularly between 36 and 42 months (from 24.7% to 26.7% to 32%). Even at 30 months, many children frequently responded to the heritage language (Spanish) in English.

Discussion/Future Topics

Based on the results of the present and previous studies, it is apparent that language attrition happens rapidly. Ribot and colleagues (2018) find less attrition among children raised in Spanish-dominant homes. That is, children raised in Spanish-dominant homes in the U.S. tend to have equal expressive and receptive language skills in both Spanish and English. Conversely, children being raised in a balanced home (i.e., equal Spanish and English input), have greater receptive than expressive language skills in Spanish and tend to be English-dominant (e.g., Hoff, 2017; Ribot et al., 2018).

Ribot and colleagues (2018) also discuss the importance of the child’s production of the language they are acquiring in bilingual homes (bilingual caregivers should create a communicative environment that encourages turn taking and offers the child an opportunity to respond in their L1). Bilingual children with language impairment may be more at risk of language attrition compared to their bilingual typically developing peers (e.g., Restrepo, 2003; Restrepo & Kruth, 2000).

English-only education models may also contribute to language attrition, thus studies have explored how education and intervention models that include use of the child’s L1 as a bridge to acquiring their L2 may improve their overall vocabulary, morphosyntactic, and emergent literacy skills, and assist in the maintenance of their L1 (e.g., Ebert, Kohnt, Pham, Disher, & Payesteh, 2014; Farver, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2009; Lugo-Neris, Jackson, & Goldstein, 2010; Restrepo, Morgan, & Thompson, 2013; Uccelli & Pazé, 2007).

Bilingual education models and speech-language pathology intervention models appear to prevent language attrition in young bilingual children who are both typically developing and language delayed (e.g., Ebert, Kohnt, Pham, Disher, & Payesteh, 2014; Farver, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2009; Lugo-Neris, Jackson, & Goldstein, 2010; Restrepo, Morgan, & Thompson, 2013; Uccelli & Pazé, 2007).

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References