

Pronominal anaphora resolution in bilingual speakers:  
the wider picture

Antonella Sorace  
University of Edinburgh

Recent research has focused on the concept of ‘interface’ between syntax and other cognitive systems as a predominant locus of instability in bilingual language development. Some specific interface phenomena, such as the use and interpretation of subject pronouns in null subject languages, have been found to be unstable in different bilingual populations, including early simultaneous bilingual children, near-native L2 speakers, and L1 speakers in a situation of attrition from a second language. Furthermore, subject pronouns have been shown to present optionality not only in bilingual speakers of two languages that have different settings of the null subject parameter (e.g. Italian-English) but also in speakers of two typologically similar null subject languages (e.g. Italian-Spanish, Greek-Spanish). Other interfaces, in contrast, are problematic only for speakers of particular language combinations. Some researchers have come to the provisional conclusion that subject pronouns involve an ‘external’ syntax-discourse interface that imposes processing costs in integrating the multiple types of information involved in the appropriate selection of a particular pronominal form: exceeding the processing resources available favors the use of a ‘default’ option (i.e. the overt pronoun in Italian; see e.g. Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007; Sorace & Filiaci 2006). This explanation seems to undermine the alternative hypothesis (suggested e.g. by Tsimpli et al. 2004) that crosslinguistic influence from the most to the least economical language may be at the root of the observed overextension of overt pronouns. I will discuss both these interpretations in the light of the available experimental evidence, pointing out that cross-linguistic influence and general effects of handling two languages may not be mutually exclusive factors. The performance of bilinguals with respect to subject pronouns may therefore involve a more complex combination of linguistic and processing factors than previously assumed.