Cross-linguistic Effects on Acceptability of Verb Argument Structures in Bilingualism

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Introduction

- Grammaticality judgment and acceptability judgment tasks are very common tools in linguistics research to get insights into speakers’ mental grammar.
- Bilingual speakers sometimes give higher acceptability ratings than monolinguals, even when judging sentences in their native language (Fernandez & Souza, 2016, Zytk, 2014).
- Cross-linguistic influence may be one of the sources that leads to higher acceptability judgments, especially when a structure is ungrammatical in one language and grammatical in the other (Fernandez & Souza, 2016).
- Age of second-language acquisition may be another factor affecting ratings, but this has not been tested to our knowledge.
- We tested 3 groups of Spanish-English bilinguals on a naturalness judgment task involving ungrammatical Spanish sentences that mimicked English lexical causatives: The trainer ran the athlete around the track quickly.

Research Questions

1. Do bilinguals rate causative sentences more similarly to Spanish monolinguals or English monolinguals?
2. Does the age of second-language acquisition influence sentence ratings?
3. Does lexical frequency of the verbs predict the perceived grammaticality of the sentences?

Predictions

1. If knowledge of English grammar influences bilinguals when listening to sentences in Spanish, we should see correlations between how bilinguals and English speakers rate the same sentences.
2. The correlations with English monolinguals are expected to be stronger for early compared to late second-language learners.
3. Words that are heard more often may be allowed in a wider variety of contexts and would thus be more likely to generalize to the causative structure more, resulting in higher ratings for words of higher frequency.

Methods

- Spanish controls and Spanish-English bilinguals listened to equivalent sentences in English. The Ecuador Spanish group read the sentences phrase by phrase.
- Sentences were rated on a scale from 1 (completely unnatural) to 5 (completely natural).
- All 3 bilingual groups and the Spanish and English control groups were tested in New York City. The Ecuador Spanish group was tested in Ecuador.
- The bilinguals were highly proficient in Spanish and English; the control groups were functionally monolingual.

Results

- Table shows the mean rating across all Spanish-speaking groups.
- The trainer ran the athlete around the track quickly.
- Verb ranking: Mean of each verb across all English-speaking groups.
- English ratings are at the upper end for most, correcting for the group differences shows that the training and different orders on each verb is rated.
- Taking the mean per-verb rating across all Spanish-speaking groups, the Intercept value, better supports the idea that some verbs are favored over others.

Discussion

- The two bilingual groups who moved to the U.S. after age 10 (early and late bilinguals) resulted in the highest acceptability ratings similar to Spanish monolinguals. Heritage speakers gave higher ratings. This may be because growing up in a country that supports the second language may affect the way bilinguals perceive certain sentence structures.
- When looking at the ratings for specific verbs, all bilingual groups rated sentences similarly to English monolinguals, consistent with our predictions.
- The degree of exposure to the languages seems to influence which monolingual group bilinguals correlate with: Heritage speakers correlated most highly out of all the bilingual groups with English monolinguals and lowest out of all the bilingual groups with Spanish monolinguals.
- Certain verbs were rated higher than others, consistent across all groups, suggesting that some aspect of the verbs make them more or less acceptable in the causative structure. This pattern remained even after accounting for group differences in ratings.
- Spanish lexical frequency predicted how highly the verbs were rated in causative sentences, suggesting that sentences containing higher-frequency verbs are considered more acceptable than those containing less common verbs.

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