

Differentiation between strong and weak pronouns among bilinguals: Evidence from Spanish/English code-switching

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Introduction

- Commonly accepted distinction: strong/weak pronouns
 - Unique syntactic structures that determine distribution (Cardinaletti & Starke, 1999)

- Consider the US Spanish sentences in (1)
 - Strong pronouns: Modification (1a); coordination (1b); and prosodic stress (1c)
 - Weak pronouns: Unaltered (neither syntactically nor prosodically) (1d)

- (1) a. **Él** con el pelo negro duerme durante el día.
'He/Him with the black hair sleeps during the day.'
- b. **Él** y Alberto duermen durante el día.
'He/Him and Alberto sleep during the day.'
- c. Ella duerme durante la noche, pero **Él** duerme durante el día.
'She sleeps at night, but HE sleeps during the day.'
- d. **Él** duerme durante el día.
'He sleeps during the day.'

- However, note that the forms are homophonous
 - Is the pronoun in (1d) indeed weak?

- Context where distinction is salient: code-switching (CS)
 - Consider the US Spanish/English sentences in (2)
 - Judgments for highly proficient speakers who acquired both languages at a young age (Koronkiewicz, 2014)

- (2) a. **Él** con el pelo negro *sleeps during the day*.
'He/Him with the black hair sleeps during the day.'
- b. **Él** y Alberto *sleep during the day*.
'He/Him and Alberto sleep during the day.'
- c. Ella duerme durante la noche, pero **Él** *sleeps during the day*.
'She sleeps at night, but HE sleeps during the day.'
- d. * **Él** *sleeps during the day*.
'He sleeps during the day.'

- Clear division: Strong pronouns are acceptably switched with a finite verb (2a-c), but weak pronouns are not (2d)

- Unique opportunity to investigate strong and weak pronouns in the grammars of different types of bilinguals
 - Assuming a Minimalist approach to CS (MacSwan, 1997), acceptability ratings can be used to gain valuable insight into the mental grammars of bilinguals

- Research question: Do different types of Spanish/English bilinguals differentiate between strong and weak Spanish pronouns when code-switching?

- This project explores age of acquisition and proficiency
 - Second language (L2) learners and heritage speakers of Spanish at either high ('advanced/native-like') or intermediate proficiency
 - Pronoun categorization yet to be fully investigated for either group

References

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Methods

Participants

Table 1. Description of participant groups

	Heritage-High (N = 13)	Heritage-Intermediate (N = 11)	L2-High (N = 9)	L2-Intermediate (N = 10)
Age of Acquisition				
English	≤ 6 years	≤ 6 years	Since birth	Since birth
Spanish	≤ 6 years	≤ 6 years	> 10 years	> 10 years
Proficiency Score				
English* (out of 40)	> 30 (M = 36.8)	> 30 (M = 35.7)	> 30 (M = 38.9)	> 30 (M = 38.5)
Spanish† (out of 50)	> 37 (M = 42.5)	≤ 37 (M = 29.3)	> 37 (M = 44.3)	≤ 37 (M = 26.7)
Age				
Mean	21.3 years	21.4 years	29.1 years	22.7 years
Range	18 - 29 years	19 - 30 years	21 - 46 years	19 - 31 years

* English proficiency: Modified cloze test (O'Neill, Cornelius, & Washburn, 1981); † Spanish proficiency: Modified DELE (Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera)

Experimental Stimuli

- Target stimuli:
 - Spoken sentences with code-switched Spanish pronouns in varied contexts, as in (2) (N = 24)
 - Strong pronouns: Modification (2a); coordination (2b); prosodic stress (2c)
 - Weak pronouns: Unaltered (2d)
- Control stimuli:
 - Following González-Vilbazo et al. (2013), monolingual equivalents, as in (1) (N = 24)
 - Lexical Determiner Phrases (DPs) code-switched in same contexts (N = 24) (e.g., *ese hombre* 'that man')
 - Commonly understood to be acceptably switched (Gumperz, 1977; Lipski 1978; Timm, 1975)

Experimental Procedure

- Completed entirely online (via Ibex)
 - Background questionnaire
 - Task training and practice
 - Aural acceptability judgment
 - 7-point Likert scale
 - 1 = 'unacceptable' and 7 = 'acceptable'
 - Stimuli randomized in various blocks
 - CS stimuli first
 - Then monolingual stimuli
 - Blocks of stimuli broken up by proficiency measures, as well as other non-linguistic tasks
 - On average participants completed the task in under an hour and a half

Results

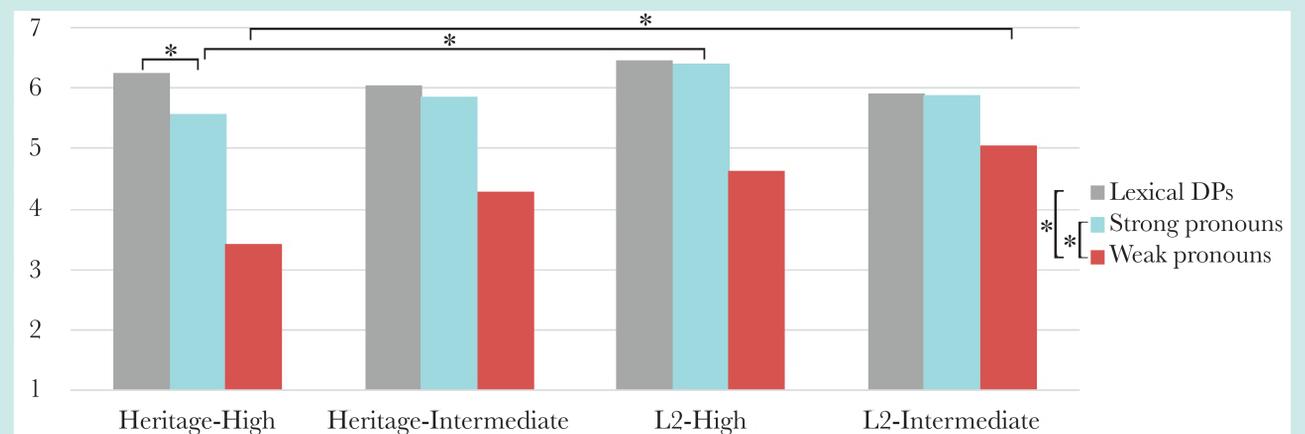
- All groups: Weak pronouns less acceptable than both lexical DPs and strong pronouns (p values < .05)
- Heritage-High: Lexical DPs more acceptable than strong pronouns (p < .001)

- Weak pronouns: Heritage-High group rated them less acceptable than L2-Intermediate (p < .001)
- Strong pronouns: Heritage-High group rated them less acceptable than L2-High group (p < .001)

Table 2. Mean average ratings by group and stimulus type

	Heritage-High M (SD)	Heritage-Intermediate M (SD)	L2-High M (SD)	L2-Intermediate M (SD)
CS stimuli				
Lexical DPs	6.25 (1.49)	6.03 (1.52)	6.46 (1.15)	5.92 (1.84)
Strong pronouns	5.56 (2.15)	5.85 (1.77)	6.40 (1.13)	5.89 (1.84)
Weak pronouns	3.42 (2.55)	4.28 (2.55)	4.61 (2.41)	5.05 (2.43)

Figure 1. Mean average ratings by group and stimulus type



Conclusions

- All Spanish/English bilingual groups do seem to differentiate between strong and weak pronouns when code-switching
- However, the extent to which they do so varies
 - Heritage speakers of Spanish with high proficiency make a stronger distinction between the two forms than L2 speakers of Spanish with an intermediate proficiency
 - The other two groups fall in the middle

- Suggests that none of these groups' grammars completely lack weak pronouns
 - For now, though, it is unclear why there seems to be a gradation of acceptability for weak pronoun switches, from unacceptable to marginally acceptable
- More broadly, this study exemplifies an innovative approach to investigating the grammars of various types of bilinguals
 - Such data is unobservable with monolingual data

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