

Grammatical gender in the speech of Polish-English children

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Child language studies used to oscillate between two positions with regard to gender assignment to nouns: (1) gender differentiation is established on the basis of semantic features (biological sex of the referent) (Mulford, 1985); (2) gender assignment is based on morpho-phonological/syntactic clues (Levy, 1988). Subsequent research on monolingual children (e.g. De Houwer, 1990, Pérez-Pereira, 1991) has confirmed that morpho-phonology plays a more important role in gender assignment than semantics. I demonstrate that the same is true for bilingual speakers, thus providing more evidence against the semantic primacy hypothesis. I also show that nouns transferred from a genderless language (English) may influence the children's production of the language with a rich gender system (Polish), sometimes leading to blurred gender assignment.

The database used here results from a two-year data collection process from three Polish-English bilingual children. It totals c. 56,000 children's utterances, of which 1,327 are mixed utterances, often containing English nouns allocated to a Polish gender. When a child simultaneously acquires languages with different gender systems, nouns transferred from one into the other may be assigned a new gender, so that lexical insertion can be used freely in the child's syntactic constructions. The gender of an insertion is identified by the inflection imposed by the noun on the agreeing element, or by its own inflection, i.e. when the noun's gender "follows from its morphology" (Corbett, 1991: 72).

Gender assignment in Polish is based on two criteria; formal and semantic. The formal properties of a noun (morphological and phonological) and its meaning may or may not point to the same gender simultaneously. Example (a) shows that semantic clues can be overridden by formal clues. The child is discussing a book about witches while looking at pictures of female characters. The semantic clues are at hand, yet the demonstrative pronoun *ten* 'this-MASC' reveals that the *witch* is allocated to the masculine gender. Example (b) provides an insight into how the two languages interact. The child first uses a noun *hen* in agreement with the demonstrative *taki* 'such-MASC', allocating the transferred English noun to the masculine gender. The investigator uses the Polish feminine equivalent *kura* 'hen' twice, and then asks a reinforcing question, after which the child also uses the Polish noun, but with masculine inflection. I propose that in this example (and others) English is hindering the child's progress in learning gender assignment rules in Polish. My data confirm observations previously reported in the literature that masculine gender can be argued to be the default, and formal clues override semantic clues. Additionally, I have observed that a genderless language may have a negative influence on the acquisition of gender assignment rules in a language with a complex gender system. This observation provides more insight into child acquisition of a complex gender system.

Examples:

(a) Popatrz, **ten** **witch** is dancing. 'look, this witch is dancing'
look this-MASC witch is dancing

(b)
*CPE: i to jest **taki** **hen**. 'and this is such a hen'
and this is such-MASC hen
*IPL: to jest co? 'this is what?'
*CPE: to jest hen. 'this is a hen'
this is hen
*IPL: kura? 'a hen?'
*CPL: tak. 'yes'
*IPL: kura to jest. 'this is a hen'
*IPL: a przy kim świnka stoi? 'and who is the piggy standing by?'
*CPL: przy **kulu**[@]. 'by the hen'
by hen-SG.MASC.LOC

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