

**Language Contact and Cross-Linguistic Interaction in Bilingual Acquisition and
Diachronic Change: Evidence from Romance Syntax**

Jürgen M. Meisel (University of Hamburg & University of Calgary)

Multilingual societies consist of multilingual individuals who acquire, process and store more than one language. From a monolingual perspective, this suggests a risk of language mixing, cross-linguistic influence, and possibly even fusion of grammatical system. Contact-induced cross-linguistic interaction has therefore been one of the most intensively studied phenomena in the Research Center on Multilingualism.

Research on acquisition in multilingual settings demonstrated that children acquiring two first languages simultaneously indeed mix languages in bilingual interactions – much like multilingual adults. Moreover, some evidence suggests that processing mechanisms may interact, resulting in differences between monolingual and multilingual speech. At the same time, however, bilingual children have been shown to differentiate grammatical systems and to attain a grammatical competence qualitatively identical to that of the respective monolinguals in each of them. In fact, their knowledge of core properties of syntax is not affected by cross-linguistic interaction, a finding widely agreed upon. In successive acquisition of bilingualism, on the other hand, this type of influence across syntactic systems does occur, although less frequently than commonly assumed.

These insights from acquisition research bear directly on explanations of diachronic change, although they are rarely taken into account in historical linguistics where language contact is frequently cited as the single most important ‘external’ factor causing syntactic ‘borrowing’ to happen. Diachronic change necessarily implies the restructuring of grammatical knowledge of individuals, but since core syntactic properties, e.g. OV/VO order, V2 effects, null-subjects, do not change across the lifespan, restructuring is hypothesized to happen in the course of acquisition. Yet such fundamental changes do not emerge in L1 acquisition, neither in monolinguals nor in bilinguals. Referring to language contact or bilingualism will thus not suffice as an explanation of syntactic restructuring. Following Weerman (1983), I will argue that it is most likely to occur in L2 acquisition or if L2 learners provide input for L1 learners. Although this is not an implausible scenario, it leads to the prediction that reorganizations of grammatical systems happen infrequently. The claim that “any linguistic feature can be transferred from any language to any other language” (Thomason & Kaufman 1988) – to the extent that it is at all correct – is therefore more confusing than enlightening.

In support of my claims I will present evidence accumulated by the research project ‘Multilingualism as cause and effect of language change’, e.g. Kaiser (2000), Hinzelin (2002), Rinke (2003, 2005), Rinke & Sitaridou (2004), Sitaridou (2005), Elsig (2008), or Rinke & Meisel (2009). Examining alleged instances of syntactic change in the history of Romance languages, e.g. loss of V2 or of null-subjects, one finds that some do not reflect syntactic restructuring. Moreover, an evaluation of data from contact regions reveals that contact-induced change does not occur in settings where it is most likely to happen.

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