

# ACQUISITION OF THE SPANISH PRESENT PERFECT BY SPANISH-ENGLISH BILINGUALS\*

*Joanne Markle LaMontagne  
University of Toronto*

## 1. Introduction

The focus of this pilot study is to examine whether there is cross-linguistic influence in the Spanish present perfect in Spanish-English bilingual children of Mexican heritage. A preference task was employed to test preferences in a recent past context with aspect data from a new contrast: the present perfect-preterit distinction. For example, when (1) and (2) are uttered

- (1) Mario ya ha terminado su tarea.  
Mario already have.3Sg.Pres finish.Past.Part his homework  
'Mario has already finished his homework.'
- (2) Mario ya terminó su tarea.  
Mario already finish.3Sg.Pret. his homework  
'Mario already finished his homework.'

are the meanings in Spanish-English bilingual children the same or different for the domain of tense and aspect as compared to Spanish and English monolingual children? Or, is there language interaction between the two languages? Spanish and English make a structural and interpretational distinction between the present perfect and simple past tenses. With respect to the acquisition of these tenses evidence from longitudinal studies shows that the Spanish simple past and present perfect tenses are acquired between 1;06 and 2;0, respectively (Hernández Pina 1984). In English, the simple past is acquired between 2;02-4;0 and the present perfect is not used productively until after 3;05 (Brown 1973).

Following Alexiadou, Rathert & von Stechow (2003), perfect constructions share a complex relationship with past and present tense, grammatical aspect (marked inflectionally on the verb) and *aktionsart* (lexical aspectual meaning expressed by the verb), and temporal adverbs. Thus, an analysis of any perfect construction, including the present perfect discussed here, must carefully consider each factor. In order to understand these factors further, and to study the Spanish present perfect and preterit distinction in an acquisition context, I propose that Spanish and English offer important insights with respect to the investigation of cross-linguistic interaction in this domain.

---

\* I would like to give special thanks to my thesis supervisor, Ana Teresa Pérez-Leroux, for her helpful comments on this working paper/pilot study. Also, I am grateful to the participants for their enthusiasm and to the CLA poster audience for the generous feedback. All errors remain my own.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1. General assumptions about child bilingual development**

It is commonly assumed that simultaneous bilingual children acquiring two languages from birth differentiate their two grammatical systems from a very young age (Meisel 1986, 1989, 2007; Genesee 1989; de Houwer 1990; Paradis 2000). Support for language differentiation emerges in different domains. However, what is highly debated in the literature is the extent and nature of interdependence in bilingual children's grammars, and why it is we see transfer of structures from one language to the other.

In syntax it is proposed that cross-linguistic influence or transfer is not random, but linguistically restricted to language-external and language internal-factors (Paradis & Genesee 1996; Müller 2003; among others). Language-external factors can include language dominance, the acquisition context, the relative frequency of the structure in the source languages, and the relative developmental advantages in one language over the other. Transfer may also occur due to restricted language-internal grammatical conditions that are defined in terms of structural compatibility (see Müller 1998; Hulk & Müller 2000, 2002, 2003; Müller & Hulk 2001) or domain-specific vulnerabilities. According to Meisel (2007) language dominance is the primary external determinant of transfer. Yet, other researchers argue that language dominance and cross-linguistic influence are not related due to evidence which suggests the cross-linguistic influence occurs in balanced bilingual children, and from the weaker language to the stronger language (see Cantone, Kupisch, Müller & Schmitz 2008).

In contrast to language-external factors of cross-linguistic influence, language-internal determinants aim to explain the structural conditions for transfer, such as structural overlap or compatibility (Müller 1998; Hulk & Müller 2000; Müller & Hulk 2001). With respect to structural overlap, Hulk & Müller (2000) proposed that cross-linguistic influence in bilingual children would occur when: (i) there is surface structure overlap leading to structural ambiguity and (ii) the syntax-pragmatics interface is involved. Some researchers question whether transfer is restricted to the syntax-pragmatics interface, and argue that the morpho-semantics also shows vulnerability to cross-linguistic influence in monolingual and bilingual acquisition (Montrul 2008; among others). Tense and aspect for example are situated at the intersection of the syntax-semantics interface. Since the learnability problem in this domain is mapping-induced and the learner is tasked with associating morpho-syntactic forms with semantic patterns, the acquisition of tense morphology impacts semantics. This suggests that certain distinctions, such as the Spanish present perfect-preterit contrast, may be more difficult to acquire than others, making tense and aspect ideal candidates for research on the role of transfer in bilingual grammars. Yet, what do we know about how semantic transfer works in the domain of tense and aspect, and more specifically in the acquisition of morpho-semantic properties?

I now discuss morpho-semantic transfer in Spanish bilingual populations.

## 2.2. Previous studies on morpho-semantic transfer in bilingual populations

Transfer is fundamental to the bilingual experience, but also selective. Traditionally, research on languages in contact has proposed different types of transfer effects such as the neutralization (free variation), reduction/extension, or reinterpretation of elements or features in bilingual grammars (Weinreich 1967). From a features point of view, this means that the learner may:

- (i) learn new functional categories not already present in the L1;
- (ii) acquire new features;
- (iii) learn that features already present in the L1 have different strengths or values in the 2L1 or L2.

Bearing this in mind, what is the experience that leads to the transfer of elements in bilingual grammars?

In child bilingual acquisition Sánchez (2004) offers important findings with respect to the assumption that transfer may cause a reinterpretation of aspectual distinctions. Sánchez examines the convergence of functional features in two incompatible systems of bilingual Quechua-Spanish children living in a language-contact situation. Sánchez hypothesized that syntactic convergence would take place when the matrix of features associated with one functional category was partially similar between the two languages, such as the category tense. In Quechua, for example, past tense features are linked to evidentiality in the matrix of features associated with tense. In Spanish however past tense features are linked to aspectual features. Sánchez's study highlights two factors that favour syntactic convergence: (i) the association of sets of interpretable features that are partially similar to Tense and shared by both Spanish and Quechua and (ii) the frequent activation of a features, i.e., evidentiality, which is not present in Spanish, but appears in Quechua.

Furthermore, studies on Spanish L2 acquisition and Spanish L1 attrition also suggest that aspect is vulnerable to transfer. For example, in L2 acquisition learners easily acquire morphological aspectual forms, such as the preterit and imperfect tenses, but exhibit difficulty in the acquisition of specific semantic properties, such as aspectual coercion (*conoci/conocía* 'I met/I knew') (Montrul & Slabakova 2002, 2003; Slabakova & Montrul, 2002). In adult L1 attrition of the aspectual interpretation of the preterit and imperfect past tenses, as well as the ongoing value of the Spanish present tense, semantic features of functional categories are affected by incomplete acquisition and tense-aspect interpretations are permeable across bilingual grammars (Montrul 2002; Cuza 2008, 2010).

Let us now discuss the Spanish present perfect.

## 3. The Spanish present perfect

### 3.1. Tense

The Spanish present perfect is a compound tense and consists of the present tense inflected form of the auxiliary verb *haber* ('to have') plus the past participle of the lexical verb, as in (3):

- (3) He cantado.  
I have.1SG.Pres. sing.Past.Part.  
'I have sung.'

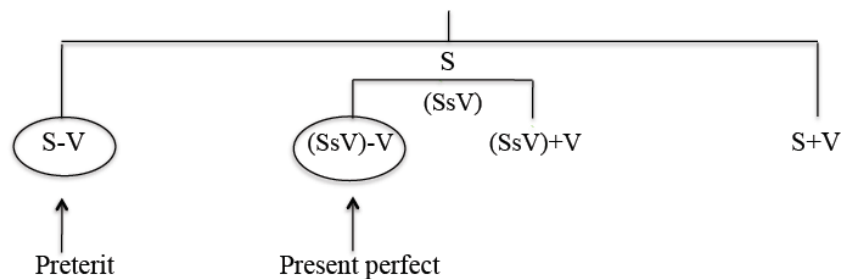
In Spanish the present perfect exhibits the properties of [+anterior], [+current relevance], [+persistence]. Following Cartagena (1999), the fundamental meaning of the present perfect is to indicate that an action took place before the moment of speech, but that the action co-exists with the present moment. Historically, the Spanish present perfect, a creation of Romance which evolved from Vulgar Latin *habeo factum*, expressed the result of a past and terminated action, one that remained as a present state (Cartagena 1999). In contrast, the Spanish preterit expresses a past action that is anterior to the origin (Rojo 1999). The preterit expresses the properties of [+anterior], [-current relevance], [-persistence]. In addition, the preterit exhibits completeness, or rather [+entirety] (Cowper 2005). In comparison to the historical evolution of the Spanish present perfect, the form of the preterit is a direct descendent of the Latin perfect that expressed perfect actions, that is punctual actions that took place before the moment of speech (Cartagena 1999).

Taking Rojo (1990) and Rojo & Veiga (1999) as a point of departure, if we consider temporal relations as vectors (V) and assign (-V) as indicating anteriority to the time of speech (S), or the deictic centre used to measure all temporal relations, and ('sV') as simultaneous to the origin, then the difference in meaning between the two tenses can be adequately captured in (4) and (5) below. Though both the present perfect and preterit express a relation of anteriority to the moment of speech, they differ in meaning in that the present perfect is anterior to a point simultaneous with the time of speech.

- (4) Canté. S-V  
I sing. 1Sg.Pret  
'I sang.'
- (5) He cantado. (SsV)-V  
I have. 1Sg.Pres. sing.Past.Part.  
'I have sung.'

Returning again to Rojo (1990) and Rojo & Veiga's (1999) temporal-vectors-as-relations analogy, the temporal relationship between the Spanish present perfect and preterit tenses described above can be captured more visually in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The temporal relationship between Spanish present perfect and preterit tenses.*



### 3.2. Aspect

With respect to the perfective-imperfective aspectual paradigm in Spanish, the present perfect and preterit are both aspectually perfective [+perfective], referring to events that are viewed as terminated. In order to further explain the perfective character of the Spanish compound tenses, García Fernández (1995) adopts Klein's (1992) time of situation (TS) and topic time distinctions, as well as Klein's definition of aspect with minor modifications. Following Klein's (1992, 1994) revisions of Reichenbach's (1947) original tense categories in which a temporal dimension to the treatment of aspect is introduced, Klein defines tense as the relationship between topic time (TT) and time of utterance (TU) and aspect as the relationship between topic time (TT) and the time of situation (TS).<sup>1</sup> Under this view, both tense and aspect express relations between time spans. The time of situation, which is expressed by the non-finite part of predicate, indicates the time at which the process designated by the verb occurs. In contrast, topic time, expressed by the finite part of the predicate, is 'the time span to which a claim made on a given occasion is constrained' (Klein 1992: 535). Thus, in addition to being [+perfective] the present perfect is also aspectually perfect [+perfect] in that it establishes a relation between two points in time, expressing the relationship between time of situation (TS) and topic time (TT). According to Klein (1992), topic time is posterior to time of situation.<sup>2</sup>

García Fernández (1999) posits that the most important varieties of perfect aspect in Spanish include the *resultative perfect*, *experiential perfect* and *continuous perfect*. Moreover, the RAE (2009) states that the following types of Spanish present perfects are available in all Spanish-speaking geographic areas:

<sup>1</sup> In Reichenbach's (1947) original tense categories tense relates three ordered points in a time line: speech time (S), reference time (R) and event time (E). Speech time (S) refers to the time at which an utterance is made, reference time (R) is relative to the time or period of time of which the situation described in the clause is considered, and, event time (E) is the time at which any event type is described.

<sup>2</sup> Klein's (1992, 1994) analysis also gives rise to aorist aspect in which topic time (TT) coincides with time of situation (TS). Since traditionally 'perfect tense' corresponded to two aspectual distinctions, that is perfect and aoristic, García Fernández (1995) posits that the Spanish compound tenses, including the present perfect, permit both of these readings. With respect to the aorist reading, the adverbial complement specifies the moment in which the action expressed by the verb occurred. On the other hand, the perfect reading specifies the reference point. In (i), *a las 10 de la noche* ('at 10 o'clock at night') refers to the moment at which the suspect left. Whereas in (ii), *en este instante* ('at this instant') signals the result of the finished action within the moment of speech and not the moment of leaving:

- |      |                  |               |                  |  |
|------|------------------|---------------|------------------|--|
| (i)  | El sospechoso se | ha            | marchado         | a las 10 de la                                 |
|      | The suspect      | has.3SG.Pres. | leave.Past.Part. | at 10 o'clock at                               |
|      | noche.           |               |                  | night  |
|      |                  |               |                  | 'The suspect has left at 10 o'clock at night.' |
| (ii) | En este instante | se ha         | marchado         | el sospechoso.                                 |
|      | In this instant  | has.3SG.Pres. | leave.Past.Part. | the suspect                                    |
|      |                  |               |                  | 'In this instant the suspect has left.'        |

Cartagena 1999: 2940

Deictic adverbial modification will be discussed in further detail in 3.3.

(i) *experiential perfect*, (ii) *continuous perfect* (with stative and activity predicates) and *continuous perfect* (with negation + telic predicate, i.e., predicates which express an inherent endpoint/culmination) and (iii) *evidential resultative*.<sup>3</sup> Examples of these four types are illustrated below from (6) to (9) (RAE 2009: 1735-1736):

- (6) *Experiential perfect*  
 Ha viajado muchas veces a Europa.  
 S/he has.3Sg.Pres travel.Past.Part. many times to Europe  
 ‘S/he has travelled many times to Europe.’
- (7) *Continuous perfect (with stative and activity predicates)*  
 He vivido aquí treinta años.  
 I have.1Sg.Pres. live.Past.Part. here thirty years  
 ‘I have lived here thirty years.’
- (8) *Continuous perfect (with negation + telic predicates)*  
 Luisa no ha llegado. Esperémosla.  
 Luisa no has.3Sg.Pres. arrive.Past.Part. Wait.1Pl.Imper.Cl.  
 ‘Luisa has not arrived. Let’s wait for her.’
- (9) *Resultative perfect*  
 ¡Cómo han subido los precios!  
 How have.3Pl.Pres. rise.Past.Part. the prices  
 ‘How the prices have risen!’

In (6), for example, the action is said to happen once or many times within a contained period or over the course of a person’s lifetime. In (7), the situation described remains open and can continue after the moment of speech, in the sense that this person ‘continues living here’. In (8), the situation does not end at the moment of speech. In (9), the interpretation obtained is that of a resulting state, and at the same time highlights the novelty or surprise of what was just expressed. For the purpose of this pilot study I focus on the *continuous perfect* (with negation + telic predicate), as in (8).

### 3.3. Adverbial modification

In addition to sharing a complex interaction with both tense and aspect, the Spanish present perfect also shares that with deictic adverbial complements. However, its co-occurring use with such adverbs is subject to debate in the literature. By definition deictic adverbial complements are anchored to the moment of speech and locate the verb on the temporal axis (García Fernández 1999). Following García Fernández (1999), there are two factors that determine the distribution of the Spanish present perfect and preterit tenses with respect to deictic adverbial complements: (i) those that include the moment of speech as part of their meaning combine with the present perfect (*hoy* ‘today’, *todavía no* ‘not yet’, *siempre* ‘always’, etcetera) and those that do not combine with the preterit (*ayer* ‘yesterday’, *anoche* ‘last night’, *el año pasado* ‘last year’,

<sup>3</sup> For a complete list of Spanish present perfect types that are specific to certain geographical regions see RAE (2009: 1735-1736).

etcetera); (ii) an understanding of the temporal distance between the event and the moment of speech or rather the *hodiernal/prehodiernal* distinction, i.e., the distinction of past events that are located on the day that includes the time of speech, *hodiernal* (i.e., *hoy* ‘today’), and those that are not, *prehodiernal* (i.e., *ayer* ‘yesterday’).

Deictic adverbial complements can be divided further into the following categories: duration, localization, phase and frequency. This pilot study focuses on two phase deictic adverbial complements such as *todavía no* (‘not yet’) and *ya* (‘already’). Phase adverbials like *todavía no* and *ya* presuppose an anterior phase to the focalized period or affirmed period via aspect (García Fernández 1999). According to Lope Blanch (1961), in Mexico it is obligatory to use the present perfect when the action is negated in the past and co-occurs with temporal phases such as *todavía no* (*Todavía no ha llegado* ‘S/he has not yet arrived’) and *aún no* (*Aún no nos ha llamado* ‘S/he still has not called us’) (*ibidem*: 134). These two examples further demonstrate the use of the *continuous present perfect* (with negation plus telic predicate). In contrast, Lope Blanch proposed that when the adverbial *ya*, which indicates execution, is used the preterit is obligatory (*Sí, ya llegó* ‘Yes, s/he already arrived’, *Ya nos llamó* ‘S/he already called.’) (*ibidem*: 137).

I now briefly discuss some general assumptions about the Spanish present perfect with respect to dialectal variation.

### 3.4. Dialectal variation

Though a discussion on the geographical extension of the use of the Spanish present perfect is beyond the scope of this paper it is important to highlight some important points with respect to its varied use.<sup>4</sup> Following Cartagena (1999), the present perfect vs. preterit distinction appears in written narrative throughout the Spanish-speaking world and is maintained in modern spoken Peninsular Spanish. The preterit however is generally employed with greater frequency in Latin America and the Canary Islands. For example, though deictic adverbial complements such as *hoy* (‘today’), among others, express simultaneity to the present moment, not all are compatible with the Spanish present perfect due to dialectal variation between Peninsular and Latin American dialects. Although the preterit typically denotes an episodic one-time event in the past, in many Peninsular varieties of Spanish the present perfect is used to express the same types of actions, as in (10). In similar cases however most speakers of Latin American varieties of Spanish prefer the preterit, as in (11):

(10) Hoy he llamado a mi madre.  
 Today I has.1SG.Pres. call.Past.Part. to my mother  
 ‘Today I have called my mother.’

(11) Hoy llamé a mi madre.  
 Today I call.1SG.Pret. to my mother  
 ‘Today I called my mother.’

Montrul (2004:97)

<sup>4</sup> For an in depth discussion on the geographical extension and dialectal variation of the Spanish present perfect see Cartagena 1999, García Fernández 1999 and RAE 2009, among others.

Moreover, in Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico and Colombia, to name only a few, it is observed that the present perfect shares properties with the Portuguese present perfect in that it is a durative and reiterative present tense. Furthermore, in the Southern Cone (i.e., Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay) the preterit is generally preferred over the present perfect.

I turn now consider the differences between the Spanish and English present perfects.

### 3.5. A contrastive analysis of the Spanish and English present perfects

The English present perfect, like that of the Spanish present perfect, is a compound tense composed of the finite form of the auxiliary verb (*to have*) plus by the past participle of the lexical verb, as in (12):

(12) I have sung.

In English the present perfect tense shares the following properties with its Spanish equivalent: [+anterior], [+current relevance], [+persistence], [-entirety]. As an aspect the English present perfect is also [+perfective] and [+perfect] as is the Spanish present perfect.

Though in both languages the present perfect exhibits perfect meaning in that it refers to a past situation that has present relevance, it is possible only in Spanish to specify the exact time of a past situation with time-specific AND non-time specific deictic adverbial complements.<sup>5</sup> In English, it is perfectly permissible for the English present perfect to co-occur with deictic adverbial complements that exhibit present time reference or have a time reference that includes the present moment, such as *now*, *recently*, *this morning* (uttered in the morning), *today*, etcetera. On the other hand, the present perfect cannot co-occur with deictic adverbial complements that refer to a specific point in the past. This restriction is known as the *Present Perfect Puzzle* (Klein 1992) and is illustrated below in (13):

(13) \*Peter has left *at 4 o'clock/yesterday/on Monday/etcetera*.

Klein (1992) proposes that the incompatibility of the present perfect in English with past-oriented time-specific deictic adverbial complements, like those in (13) has neither a syntactic or semantic cause, but rather a pragmatic one known as the *P(osition)-Definiteness Constraint*. Klein proposes that the expression of topic time (expressed by the finite part of the predicate) and time of situation (expressed by the non-finite part of the predicate and modified by *at 4 o'clock* in (13) above) cannot be both independently p-definite. Following Klein (1992),

<sup>5</sup> Comrie (1985) proposed that the use of Spanish present perfect for recent past situations is wider than that of English. For example, in some dialects of Spanish the present perfect can combine with *esta mañana* ('this morning') when uttered both that same morning or later on that same day as in (i):

(i) La he visto esta mañana.  
Cl.fem acc. has.1SG.Pres. see.Past.Part. this morning  
'I have seen her this morning.'

In English however 'I have seen her this morning' is only possible when uttered that very same morning and not later in the day.



there are however exceptions to the *P-Definiteness Constraint* in English which include certain temporally vague adverbials such as *already*, *before*, *just* and *recently*, to name only a few. An example with *already* is provided in (14):

(14) David has already left Orlando.

The example in (14) is equally possible with the English simple past, (*David already left Orlando*) however the relevant factor is the occurrence of a particular adverbial rather than recent time reference. What is interesting about *ya*, the Spanish equivalent of *already*, is that it is obligatory with the preterit in Mexican Spanish and not permissible with the present perfect. This adverb is relevant to the pilot study and will be discussed in the next section.

In sum, the Spanish and English present perfects are similar in terms of form and properties related to both tense and aspect. Where they differ however in with respect to the deictic adverbs they can take as complements. This information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *A contrastive analysis of Spanish and English present perfects with respect to form, tense, aspect and adverbial modification.*

	Spanish	English
Form	compound ( <i>haber</i> + past participle)	compound ( <i>have</i> + past participle)
Tense	[+anterior] [+current relevance] [-entirety] [+past] [+persistence]	[+anterior] [+current relevance] [-entirety] [+past] [+persistence]
Aspect	[+perfect] [+perfective]	[+perfect] [+perfective]
Adverbs	[±p-definite constraint]	[+p-definite constraint]

### 3.6. De Swart's (1998) selectional approach framework

In the selectional approach framework, De Swart (1998) proposes a compositional analysis of *aktionsart* and aspect, and argues for a selectional approach to aspectual interpretations.<sup>6</sup> Under this approach tense heads are sensitive to the aspectual properties of the eventuality descriptions (i.e., lexical semantic verb classes, such as states, processes and events) they select. The main claim is that aspectual information is layered and present at three different levels: tense operators, aspectual operators (such as aspectually-sensitive adverbs) and eventuality descriptions. What is important about this framework for acquisition is that tense heads are sensitive to the aspectual properties of the eventuality descriptions they select.

<sup>6</sup> De Swart's (1998) selectional approach framework falls within Discourse Representation Theory (DRT) (Kamp & Reyle 1993). DRT incorporates sentence-level and discourse-level semantics in the processing of narrative discourse.

#### 4. Research questions and hypothesis

This pilot study sets out to examine whether there is cross-linguistic influence in the acquisition of the Spanish present perfect in Spanish-English bilingual children of Mexican heritage. The research questions are as follows:

- (i) Is a child's interpretation of the Spanish present perfect altered because of influence from English? If yes, then (ii)
- (ii) Can this influence be due to language dominance?

Given the facts in sections 3.3. and 3.5., the predictions for a recent past context in Spanish and English with the present and perfect tenses in combination with deictic adverbial complements *todavía no*/'not yet' and *ya*/'already' are illustrated in Table 2:

Table 2. *Distribution of adverbs with present perfect and simple past tenses in Mexican Spanish and English.*

	Present perfect	Simple past
Mexican Spanish	<i>todavía no, *ya</i>	<i>ya, *todavía no</i>
English	not yet, already	not yet, already

Based on the distribution of the above-mentioned deictic adverbial complements with present perfect and simple past tenses in Mexican Spanish and English, it is hypothesized that Spanish-English bilingual children's present perfect and preterit preferences will be less categorical in Spanish due to influence from English. Moreover, this influence may be stronger in bilingual children that are English dominant.

#### 4. Method

##### 4.1. Participants

In this pilot study I examined two Spanish-English simultaneous bilingual brothers aged 6;0 and 3;10, as well as two adult controls for a total of four participants. Both children were born in Mexico, however at the ages of 2;6 and 3 months the children and their parents moved to Toronto, Canada. Upon arriving in Toronto, the children's age of acquisition of onset of English was 2;11 and 8 months, respectively. At the time of testing, the eldest child was enrolled in grade 1 at an English-speaking school and the youngest attended full-time day care full in English. The bilingual children's parents are native speakers of Mexican Spanish and were also both born in Mexico. The entire family has resided in Canada for just over 3 years.

The two adult controls included one native speaker of Spanish and one native speaker of English.<sup>7</sup> The Spanish-speaking control was born in Mexico. At the time of testing he was 37 years of age and had resided in Canada for 9 years. The English-speaking control was a 34 year-old female who was born in Canada.

<sup>7</sup> Due to time restrictions and access to both L1 Spanish- and L1 English-speaking children, adult controls were used in this pilot study. In future work L1 children of both languages will be recruited.

## 4.2. Parental language questionnaire<sup>8</sup>

I administered a parental language questionnaire in order to collect basic information about the children's language background. The questions focused primarily on the following three areas: *language behaviour* (the children's, parents' and caregivers' ability in Spanish and English), *language use* (with family members, caregivers/teachers, friends) and *language history* (the ages at which each language was first used in the home, daycare, school, and the total number of hours/week the child watches TV or reads in each language). Results from the parental language questionnaire are included below in section 4.4.

## 4.3. Experimental design

In order to fulfill the goal of testing preferences for the Spanish present perfect vs. preterit contrast in bilingual child, I employed a contextualized sentence preference based on Pirvulescu & Belzil (2008). The task included eight minimal pairs of test sentences plus one training item (i.e., an unrelated minimal pair) consisting of the Spanish present perfect and preterit tenses in combination with one of the following two deictic adverbial complements: *todavía no* ('not yet') and *ya* ('already').<sup>9</sup> The order of the tenses was counter-balanced across the participants and the session was administered in Spanish. Each minimal pair of test sentences was introduced by an age-appropriate short story and accompanied by an illustration. The test sentences included one of the following eight verbs: *abrir* ('to open'), *caerse* ('to fall'), *cerrar* ('to close'), *comenzar* ('to start'), *dormirse* ('to fall asleep'), *llegar* ('to arrive'), *poner* ('to put') and *terminar* ('to finish'). The present perfect was controlled by type and limited to the *continuous present perfect* (with negation—*todavía no*—plus telic predicates *abrir*, *caerse*, *cerrar*, and *poner*). Upon reading each short story aloud to the participants I asked *¿Cómo lo dirías tú?* ('How would you say it?'), and then proceeded with the presentation of the target sentences after which the participant stated their preference. Examples of the sentence preference task are included in (15) and (16) below:

(15) Continuous present perfect (with *todavía no* plus telic predicate)

*Hoy es el cumpleaños de Dora. Su familia le hace una fiesta y todos los amigos de ella vienen. Antes de apagar las velas del pastel de cumpleaños y de abrir el regalo, Dora quiere esperar a que lleguen todos.*

'Today is Dora's birthday. Her family is throwing her a party and all of her friends are coming. Before blowing out the candles on the birthday cake and opening her present, Dora wants to wait until everyone arrives.'

*¿Cómo lo dirías tú?* / 'How would you say it?'

(i) *Dora todavía no abrió su regalo.* / 'Dora did not open her gift yet.'

<sup>8</sup> The controls were also administered a brief questionnaire on their language use. For example, they were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (never)-5 (always) how often they used their L1 (and any additional languages) at home, at work and socially, etcetera.

<sup>9</sup> No distracter items were included in this pilot study, but will appear in future work.

o / 'or'

(ii) *Dora todavía no ha abierto su regalo.* / 'Dora has not opened her gift yet.'

(16) Preterit (combined with the deictic adverbial complement *ya*)

*Una vez a la semana Elmo toma clases de piano. Hoy el maestro viene a la casa de Elmo. Va a llegar en unos 15 minutos. Elmo está nervioso y quiere practicar un poco más. Él dice: "Voy a comenzar ahora" y se sienta a tocar.*

'Once a week Elmo takes piano lessons. Today the teacher is coming to Elmo's house. He is going to arrive in 15 minutes. Elmo is nervous and wants to practice a little more. He says: 'I am going to start playing' and sits down to play.'

*¿Cómo lo dirías tú?* / 'How would you say it?'

(i) *Elmo ya ha comenzado a tocar el piano.* / 'Elmo has already started to play.'

o / 'or'

(ii) *Elmo ya comenzó a tocar el piano.* / 'Elmo already started to play.'

#### 4.4. Results

Responses were coded by past tense preference for each of the two adverb types across all participants. Raw percentages for present perfect versus preterit preferences for *todavía no* and *ya* are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. *Percentage of present perfect vs. preterit preferences in a recent past context for todavía no.*

Participant	Present perfect (%)	Preterit (%)
Child A (6;0)	25	75
Child B (3;10)	50	50
Control C (Spanish)	50	50
Control D (English)	50	50

Table 4. *Percentage of present perfect vs. preterit preferences in a recent past context for ya.*

Participant	Present perfect (%)	Preterit (%)
Child A (6;0)	75	25
Child B (3;10)	0	100 <sup>10</sup>
Control C (Spanish)	0	100
Control D (English)	25	75

The preliminary results in Table 3 show that Child A had a greater preference for the preterit (75%) compared to the present perfect (25%) when combined

<sup>10</sup> Child B was unable to respond to one item therefore his results are based on 7/8 responses and not 8/8.

with *todavía no*. In contrast, Child B had an equal preference for both the present perfect (50%) and preterit tenses (50%) with *todavía no*. Control C control also demonstrated an equal preference for *todavía no* with both Spanish past tenses (50% vs. 50%). Similarly, Adult D also showed an equal preference for ‘not yet’ and ‘already’ with both the present perfect (50%) and simple past tenses (50%) in English. With respect to the bilingual children’s preferences, the results for this condition suggest a possible cross-linguistic influence from English, particularly in the case of Child A. According to the parental language questionnaire, though both children speak English approximately 25-40 hours a week at school or day care and Spanish approximately 25-40 hours week in the evenings and on weeks with the parents, Child A is older and has had more contact with the majority language for a longer period of time than Child B.

The preliminary results in Table 4 show that Child A exhibits a greater preference for the present perfect (75%) more so than the preterit (25%) when paired with *ya* as compared to Child B who preferred the preterit 100% of the time. Adult C preferred the preterit over the present perfect 100% of the time when combined with *ya*. Adult D showed a greater preference for the simple past (75%) with ‘already’ over the present perfect (25%) in English. With respect to Child A it appears that his past tense preference for *ya* pattern against what was predicted for Mexican Spanish. This suggests that cross-linguistic influence cannot explain his results, but that neutralization can. Furthermore, these results also suggest the possibility of active and early attrition in school-aged bilingual children.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Let us now return to the pilot study’s original research questions and hypothesis.

*Question 1. Is a child’s interpretation of the Spanish present perfect altered because of influence from English? If yes, then (ii).*

Answer: Yes, based on the results from both the preference task and the parental language questionnaire, it appears that there is influence from English, particularly in the eldest child Child A who demonstrated a greater preference for the Spanish preterit with *todavía no* and the Spanish present perfect with *ya*. Let us recall that in English both the present perfect and simple past tenses can combine freely with ‘not yet’ and ‘already’. In general, Child A’s preferences patterned in the opposite direction of what was predicted for Spanish and are less categorical than those of the Mexican-Spanish control, Adult C.

*Question 2: Can this influence be due to language dominance?*

Answer: Yes, in the case of Child A, it is possible that this influence can be due to language dominance. According to the parental language questionnaire, though both Child A and Child B spend approximately 25-40 hours per week speaking English at school/day care/playing together/playing with other Spanish-speaking friends, as well as 25-40 hours per week speaking Spanish (evenings and weekends) with their parents, Child A is older and as such has been exposed to English for a longer period of time.

*Hypothesis: Spanish-English bilingual children's present perfect and preterit preferences will be less categorical in Spanish due to influence from English. Moreover, this influence may be stronger in bilingual children that are English dominant.*

Answer: The preliminary results from this pilot study show that both Child A and Child B's Spanish past tense preferences with *todavía no* were less categorical than what was predicted for Mexican Spanish. Furthermore, Child A's past tense preferences with *ya* were also less categorical than what was predicted for Mexican Spanish, i.e., *ya* is obligatory with the preterit in Mexican Spanish. These results may be due in part to Child A, the eldest, having had longer exposure to English as compared to Child B, the youngest. Based on the parental language questionnaires, though both children speak Spanish at home with their parents, they frequently speak English with each other and with other Spanish-heritage children, both at home and away from home. It is clear from these preliminary results, particularly for Child A, that Spanish-English bilingual children's present perfect vs. preterit preferences are far from categorical. In sum, I propose that cross-linguistic influence from English can explain Child A's preferences for the Spanish preterit with *todavía no* and that neutralization, and perhaps early active attrition, can explain his Spanish present perfect preferences with *ya*.

However, in order to say more about the bilingual children's preferences, as well as a possible influence from English, it will be useful to test both parents and caregivers (day care workers, teachers, etcetera) in future work. For example, in her work on the acquisition of the English present perfect by Scottish- and American-English children, Gathercole (1986) observed that in longitudinal spontaneous production, Scottish-English children produced the present perfect more frequently than the simple past, whereas the American children produced the simple past more frequently than the present perfect. Gathercole correlated these results to the rate of frequency of the use of the present perfect and simple past tenses in the caregivers' input. The inclusion of parents and caregivers/teachers would help to explain whether the child's use of the Spanish present perfect is due to influence from the majority language or rather to the input s/he receives in the heritage language (Spanish). In addition, the inclusion of both parents and caregivers would provide a better idea of what kind of input the children receive in each of their two first languages.

### References

- Brown, R. 1973. *A first language: the early stages*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Cantone, K. Kupisch, T., Müller, N. & Schmitz, K. 2008. Rethinking language dominance in bilingual children. *Linguistische Berichte* 215: 307-343.
- Cartagena, N. 1999. Los tiempos compuestos. In I. Bosque & V. Demonte (Eds.), *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española, vol. 2*, (pp. 2935-2975). Madrid: Espasa Calpe.
- Cowper, E. 2005. The Geometry of Interpretable Features: INFL in English and Spanish. *Language*, 81(1), 10-46.
- Cuza, A. 2008. The L2 Acquisition and L1 Attrition of the Interpretation and Use of Aspectual Properties in Spanish among English-speaking L2 Learners and Long-term Spanish Immigrants. Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.
- Cuza, A. 2010. The L1 attrition of the Spanish present tense. *Hispania* 93.2: 256-272.

- De Houwer, A. 1990. *The acquisition of two languages from birth: A case study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Swart, H. 1998. Aspect Shift and Coercion. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 16, 347-385.
- García Fernández, L. 1995. La interpretación temporal de los tiempos compuestos. *Verba* 22, 363-396.
- García Fernández, L. 1999. Los complementos adverbiales temporales: La subordinación temporal. In *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española, vol. 2*, eds. I. Bosque & V. Demonte, 3129-3202. Madrid: Espasa Calpe.
- Gathercole, V. C. 1986. The acquisition of the present perfect: explaining differences in the speech of Scottish and American children. *Journal of Child Language* 13, 537-560.
- Hernández Pina, F. 1984. *Teorías psico-sociolingüísticas y su aplicación a la adquisición del español como lengua materna*. España: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Hulk, A. & Müller, N. 2000. Bilingual first language acquisition at the interface between syntax and pragmatics. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 3 (3), 227-244.
- Kamp, H. & Reyle, U. 1993. *From Discourse to Logic (Part 2)*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press.
- Klein, W. 1992. The Present Perfect Puzzle. *Language* 68(3), 525-552.
- Kelin, W. 1994. *Time in Language*. London: Routledge.
- Lope Blanch, J.M. 1961. Sobre el uso del pretérito en el español de México. In *Estudios sobre el español de México*, eds. UNAM, 131-143.
- Meisel, J. 1989. Early differentiation of languages in bilingual children. In *Bilingualism across the lifespan. Aspects of acquisition, maturity and loss*, eds. K. Hyltenstam & L. Obler, 13-40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meisel, J. 2007. On autonomous syntactic development in multiple first language acquisition. In *BUCLD 31 Proceedings*, eds. H. Caunt-Nulton *et al.*, 26-45. Somerville, Mass: Cascadilla Press.
- Montrul, S. 2002. Incomplete Acquisition and Attrition of Spanish Tense/Aspect Distinctions in Adult Bilinguals. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 5:1. 39-58.
- Montrul, S. 2008. *Incomplete acquisition in bilingualism: re-examining the age factor*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Montrul, S. & Slabakova, R. 2002. The L2 Acquisition of Morphosyntactic and Semantic Properties of the Aspectual Tenses Preterite and Imperfect. In *The Acquisition of Spanish Morphosyntax: The L1/L2 Connection*, eds. A.T. Pérez-Leroux & J. Liceras, 113-149. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Montrul, S. & Slabakova, R. (2003). Competence similarities between native and near-native speakers: An investigation of the preterit/imperfect contrast in Spanish. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 25: 351-398.
- Müller, N. 2003. *(In)vulnerable domains in multilingualism*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Müller, N. & Hulk, A. 2001. Cross-linguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition: Italian and French as recipient languages. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 4(1), 1-21.
- Nueva gramática de la lengua española*. 2009. Real Academia Española, Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española. Madrid: Espasa Calpe.
- Paradis, J. & Genesee, F. 1996. Syntactic Acquisition in Bilingual Children: Autonomous or Interdependent? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18, 1-25.
- Pirvulescu, M. & Belzil, I. 2008. The Acquisition of the Past Participle Agreement in Québec French. *Language Acquisition* 15, 75-88.
- Rojo, G. 1990. Relaciones entre temporalidad y aspecto en el verbo español. In *Tiempo y aspecto en español*, eds. I. Bosque, 17-41. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Rojo, G. & Veiga, A. 1999. El tiempo verbal: Los tiempos simples. *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española, vol. 2*, eds. I. Bosque & V. Demonte, 2867-2934. Madrid: Espasa Calpe.
- Sánchez, L. 2004. Functional Convergence in the Tense, Evidentiality and Aspectual Systems of Quechua-Spanish Bilinguals. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 7(2), 147-162.