Evidence for transfer in bilingual children?

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The paper by Natascha Müller follows the new way of studying bilingual first language acquisition which has been advocated in the last few years by several researchers (Döpke, 1996,1997; Gawlitzek-Maiwald & Tracy, 1996; Hulk & Van der Linden, 1996; Hulk, 1997). In this new approach, while it is taken as an established fact that bilingual children are capable of early language differentiation, at the same time a lot of attention is given to cross-linguistic influence as an important characteristic of bilingual first language acquisition. We will discuss the nature of differentiation and transfer here as presented by Müller's paper and the way we see it ourselves. We will illustrate our position with examples from the French-Dutch bilingual child we have been studying for some time.

In the last decade most syntactic studies of bilingual language acquisition have stressed the fact that bilingual children are able to differentiate between their two languages from very early on. Investigations into large corpora of bilingual children's utterances such as the DUFDE project (contributions in Meisel 1990, 1994) have shown that children differentiate between their two languages both at the lexical and at the syntactic level. The same has been argued for by De Houwer (1990) for Dutch/English bilingual children. Lanza (1992) showed that formal aspects of language mixing by bilingual two-year-olds are not a sign of the child's lack of language differentiation, but indicate instead that the children do differentiate their language use in a contextually sensitive way. Most of these papers aim at denying the earlier hypothesis that children start off their language acquisition with one unitary language system for both languages (Taeschner, 1983; Vihman, 1985). However, in arguing – convincingly – against the idea that bilingual children first have a unitary language system, many of these linguists tend to overlook examples of cross-linguistic influence. They sometimes even deny that there is any influence from one language on the other and state that bilingual language acquisition is the same as monolingual acquisition: in Müller et al. (1996), the *bilingual* child Ivar is taken to illustrate the *monolingual* acquisition of the French clitics system. Apparent counter-evidence against this claim seems to be overlooked or not taken seriously by these authors. Schlyter and Hakansson (1994) claim that in their study of French/Swedish bilinguals they do not find any signs of transfer of word order from one language into the other and the same claims have been made by Meisel (1989) and Parodi (1990) for the reciprocal influence of French and German on children in the DUFDE project. Recently, Paradis and Genesee (1996) claimed that they did not find any influence of one language on the other in French/English bilingual children. They conclude that these children show no evidence at all of transfer. Interestingly, however, they do mention some puzzling data which at first sight look like transfer data, but which they qualify as follows: "these aberrant examples are most likely performance errors". Although it may be true that at least part of these data are performance errors, this does not mean that there is no need to explain them in a more satisfactory way. Why do these bilinguals make precisely these errors, that seem to reflect characteristics of their other language?

Some recent, partly unpublished studies of the syntactic development of bilingual children (Döpke, 1996,1997; Gawlitzek-Maiwald and Tracy, 1996; Hulk & Van der Linden, 1996; Hulk, 1997) have revived the interest in such "mixed" utterances, which are attested for different language pairs. Having established the fact that bilingual children are able to differentiate between their two languages at a very early age, we are now at the point where we can address the question of cross-linguistic influence in a more precise way. This is what Müller attempts to do in her paper. We will show that our position is different from hers in that we do no think that bilingual children are subject to *direct* transfer from one language into the other. But we do think that *indirect* influence from one language on the other plays a role, especially in those cases where the input in one language is ambiguous or presents conflicting evidence to the child.

Müller seems to equate the notion of transfer with that commonly used in studies in second language acquisition. However, in those studies the subjects have already instantiated a first language from which they can transfer elements or parameter settings into the second language. In bilingual first language acquisition, there is no "first language" to build on, so the nature of "transfer" is necessarily different. We prefer not to use the term transfer at all, but rather cross-linguistic influence. Indeed, in studying bilingual language acquisition we witness the emergence of grammars of two languages at the moment of creation, when they are in close contact with each other. As suggested already by MacWhinney (1987), the bilingual child may attempt to make short cuts and allow strategies from one language to be used in the other one. Cues may be stronger in one language than the other, leading to facilitation of acquisition. The acquired language facts may then be adopted in the other language as well. We especially expect such "short cuts" when the child has to cope with problematic input, which is ambiguous and contains evidence for more than one grammatical analysis. Indeed, the bilingual child is exposed to a much wider range of syntactic possibilities than a monolingual child, and it is offered structural possibilities which monolinguals do not have. At the same time however, the input of each of the languages separately is probably smaller for the bilingual child than for the monolingual child, which makes the cues for each individual language less salient.

Müller raises the question "what is transferred"?, which we will reformulate as: "when does cross-linguistic influence appear in the child's language development"? Müller adopts the hypothesis that there is transfer of parametric values or feature specifications. Although we agree with her that this is a plausible hypothesis, we have problems with the way in which she elaborates it. Müller observes that the bilingual children she has studied sometimes use both correct and incorrect word orders at the same point in their development. In other words these children seem to hesitate about the right value of a parameter. This is called the "pendulum effect" by Müller. We found a similar effect in the French-Dutch bilingual girl Anouk (see Hulk & Van der Linden, 1996; Hulk, 1997): Anouk seems to have problems with the head parameter in French since she produces utterances with both V-XP and XP-V orders. The former corresponds to the French setting of the head parameter, the latter to the Dutch one.

(1)	penche tête, non "bow head no"	An. 2.4.23	V_fONeg
(2)	papa cheche Anouk "daddy get Anouk"	An. 2.6.11	SV_fO
(3)	atejer parti "(to) studio left"	An 2.4.17	XPV_i
(4)	Anouk papa dessine "Anouk daddy draws"	An 2.4.23	SOV_f

Müller advances the hypothesis that pendulum effects are the result of transfer and are restricted to phenomena involving the setting of what she calls **sub**parameters. The notion of subparameter however is not generally accepted in linguistic theory. It is not even clear what exactly a subparameter is. Müller does not give a general characterization, but just illustrates the notion by giving an example. She mentions that the special status of German complementizers (they are functional elements associated with finiteness) could be conceived of as a subparameter of the global +/- V2 parameter: in some V2 languages, such as German, complementizers do not instantiate a separate functional category, in others, such as French, they do. Müller hypothesizes that there is no triggering data for this kind of subparameter and therefore the (bilingual) children may hesitate as to the status of complementizers in German, whereas they do not hesitate as to whether German is V2 or not (the global parameter). Moreover, Müller makes an even stronger claim: transfer in bilingual individuals could be restricted to subparameters. However, if we look at the "pendulum effect" in Anouk's utterances given above, we do not know of any subparameter that could play a role. On the contrary, it seems to be the setting of the "global" head parameter that is causing problems for the child. Therefore it is unclear what Müller's explanation of such cross-linguistic influence could be. Moreover, before we can address the question whether Anouk's French OV-utterances are an illustration of transfer from Dutch, we have to consider acquisition data of monolingual French children to find out if they ever produce XP-V orders. Interestingly, as we have shown elsewhere, this is indeed the case (examples from Ferdinand, 1996):

(5)	couteau met "knife put"	NAT 2.2.2
(6)	un pomme de terre donne "a potato give"	GRE 2.1.25

These utterances have been analysed as involving fronting of a focalized constituent in the stage of language development when null subject (clitics) are still the rule. We have argued that the XP-V orders produced by Anouk should also be analyzed as focalizations. Kail (1989), quoting McWhinney and Bates, observes in a completely different situation that young children in several languages place new information at the beginning of utterances, followed by old or less focal elements of meaning, contrary to adults who tend to start their sentences with old or topical information. Psycholinguistically speaking then, an analysis of the XP-V orders as focalizations is not an implausible one.

The fact that these focalizations are more frequent in Anouk's French than in the French of monolingual children reflects, we think, the *indirect* influence of Dutch. Not only do monolingual Dutch children use these same word orders, in adult Dutch too, as a consequence of the V2 property of the language, we find clauses with fronted objects:

(7) Zuurkool lust ik niet
"sauerkraut like I not"

Therefore, we have suggested that these XP-V orders are not an example of transfer of basic Dutch OV-orders nor of mis-setting of a parametric value on the basis of the Dutch input. They represent an example of a general tendency in child language to start the sentence with new information – a tendency which is also present in monolingual French children. Their frequency may be explained by the indirect input influence of adult Dutch, where fronting of XPs is a general syntactic phenomenon.

Interestingly, Müller also mentions that monolingual German children have problems with the acquisition of word order in subordinate clauses and produce (incorrect) utterances similar to the ones produced by the bilingual children. Müller relates this to the fact that the input is ambiguous and therefore presents conflicting evidence. Word order in the German subordinate clause does indeed present a lot of conflicting evidence to the child: the input offers utterances which lead to different possible analyses of these clauses. It is in this context that uncertainty is greatest in the child and that cross-linguistic influence may

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728998000297 Published online by Cambridge University Press

occur. This corresponds exactly to what we have found in the utterances of the French-Dutch bilingual child Anouk, not only as far as XP-V orders are concerned but also in the production of French object pronouns. Anouk's production of object pronouns seems again to reflect the influence of Dutch (Hulk, 1997). At first, until 2.7.5, object clitics are rare, and always situated in front of an infinitive:

(8) faut **leur** donner de l'eau — An 3.1.04
"must them give water"

At age 3.3.17 Anouk produces her first object clitics in preverbal position of a finite verb:

(9) si je **le** mets là — An 3.3.17
"if I it put there"
(10) je **la** tiens — An 3.3.17
"I it hold"

Strikingly, only one week later Anouk makes her first "placement error" with an object clitic:

(11) * je prends **la** — An 3.3.23
"I take her"
(correct: je **la** prends)

The errors represent about 10 per cent of all the utterances with object clitics for the period of recordings; in other words it is not a very frequent phenomenon, but is certainly not negligible. Contrary to what we have seen in the section about V-XP/XP-V orders, the misplacement of object clitics has not been found in the data of monolingual French children. However, Jakubowicz et al. (1997) found that French speaking children with developmental dysphasia have problems with the acquisition of object pronouns. Moreover, as we have shown elsewhere (Hulk 1997), these errors look very much like errors made by (adult) Dutch learners of L2 French. Is this a clear case of transfer then? Again we have to be careful, and ask ourselves what exactly these errors tell us. It is important to note that the (adult) French data are not always unambiguous as for the status of the object pronouns: some constructions allow both an analysis as clitics and as weak pronouns. This is true among other things for constructions involving a modal verb and an infinitive, where the object clitic in French figures in between the two verbs:

(12) Jean peut le faire
"Jean can it do"

Exactly the same (superficial) order is found in Dutch, which has weak object pronouns (and no clitics):

(13) Jan kan het doen
"Jan can it do"

As has been observed in the literature on the L2 acquisition of French (see e.g. Schwartz, 1996), the L2–learners are confronted with conflicting evidence as to the exact feature composition of such pronouns.

Let us consider the Dutch/French bilingual child again. The French evidence she gets is not unambiguous. However, we know from the acquisition of monolingual French children that this does not have to be a problem. But the bilingual child is in a different situation – she gets input from her two languages, French and Dutch. Not only does the Dutch evidence clearly suggest a weak pronoun analysis, it also partly overlaps with the French evidence, thus creating more conflicts for the exact analysis of French. The bilingual child will be misled more easily than the monolingual child, because on the one hand, she gets less non-ambiguous (only French) input and on the other hand she gets more ambiguous, conflicting evidence due to the input of her other language, Dutch. Again we do not want to go into the exact analysis of the Dutch and French pronoun system. We only want to suggest that in this case the child appears to be confronted with ambiguous input and therefore she uses what Müller calls a "relief strategy", which in this case is probably related to the acquisition of the exact feature composition of the elements in question.

We have argued that we agree with Müller that bilingual children may use a relief strategy in order to cope with ambiguous input. However we do not agree with her as she states that this relief strategy (always) takes the form of (pure) transfer and that this is expected (only) in the case of phenomena involving subparameters, for which she claims there are no triggers. We have shown two different cases of cross-linguistic influence. In both cases it is the *indirect* influence of Dutch that makes the child overgeneralize a pattern that is already present in French. In the case of XP-V orders we have argued that it is related with a focalization strategy. In the case of object pronoun acquisition it is the feature composition of the pronouns in question which causes the problems. Although these two phenomena are very similar to the one discussed by Müller for Ivar, in these cases no clear subparameters are at stake. We do not think either that these are phenomena for which there are no triggers. On the contrary, we crucially assume that in these cases the children have too many triggers. Or in other words that the two languages present conflicting evidence and therefore conflicting cues or triggers for the acquisition of the phenomena involved.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728998000297 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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