PEER COMMENTARIES

The importance of discourse-pragmatics in acquisition

In their keynote article, Müller and Hulk provide valuable evidence bearing on a question of central importance in the field of bilingual acquisition. Contrary to previous claims in the literature (e.g. Paradis and Genesee, 1996), they suggest that the two languages of a bilingual learner can and do influence each other in the course of acquisition, provided the right circumstances obtain. Though the logic of argumentation is somewhat complex, Müller and Hulk present it very clearly and illustrate it well with the situation of German–Romance bilingual children learning about omission of objects. This article raises many very interesting issues which all would be great starting points for further discussion and research. However, I will limit my comments here to two issues which touch on pragmatics.

First, I will address the first of Müller and Hulk’s conditions for crosslinguistic influence in bilingual acquisition – that the structure in question must involve the interface between syntax and pragmatics. Second, I will raise some questions about children’s use of pragmatic knowledge in argument omission, and elaborate this with reference to my own and related research.

Müller and Hulk claim that the C-domain is particularly vulnerable for both the monolingual and bilingual learner since it is here that children must interface between syntax and other cognitive systems, especially pragmatics. For the monolingual learner, structures which exist at this interface are particularly difficult to learn, and for the bilingual learner, such structures are susceptible to crosslinguistic influence. This claim is not new for research on monolingual children, as Müller and Hulk note. In fact, it has become rather epidemic in the field to reanalyze what once were considered paradigm examples of acquisition of pure syntax as situations in which pragmatics has a major influence in the acquisition process. Some examples of this include null subject and object (e.g. Schaeffer, 2000), root infinitives (e.g. Hoekstra and Hyams, 1997), and principle B (e.g. Chien and Waxler, 1990). While I find it very intriguing that the syntax–pragmatics interface poses special problems for learners, and while I do indeed think that discourse-pragmatics plays a large part in language acquisition, I think that there are a number of difficulties with raising the interface claim to the level that Müller and Hulk do.

In order to make very clear that the interface between syntax and pragmatics in the C-domain is the relevant factor that causes particular problems or allows for crosslinguistic influence, Müller and Hulk would need to control for several other possible explanations. Most obviously, they would need examples of structures which they believe are not at the syntax–pragmatics interface (either syntax alone or pragmatics alone), and therefore structures which they predict should not be vulnerable to special learning difficulties for monolinguals, or to crosslinguistic influence for bilinguals. Without such evidence, the relevance of the syntax–pragmatics interface seems convenient rather than strongly motivated, and it is not clear that Müller and Hulk are saying anything more than that both syntax and pragmatics are relevant for acquisition, or that it takes more time to master more complicated structures, which is certainly not news.

A second control of the interface hypothesis would address the issue of causality vs. correlation. Müller and Hulk show that the onset of the C-system, as indicated by the appearance of such structures as complementizers, verb second (V2) in Germanic, and topicalization, closely co-occurs in time with a decrease in target-deviant object omission (leaving aside some individual differences and variations from the standard pattern). However, co-occurrence does not necessarily mean causality, especially in this situation since numerous changes in the grammatical system occur right around MLU 2.6. The argument that the onset of the C-system causes a reanalysis of the mechanics of object realization from a universal pragmatic analysis to a language-specific syntactic analysis would be much more convincing if one were able to show that other changes at that time were not related to this reanalysis.

In the same vein, the importance of the interface would be supported by extending this analysis to other phenomena which have relevance for both syntax and pragmatics. An obvious candidate is subject drop, which also meets both of Müller and Hulk’s criteria. Subject omission clearly involves both syntactic and pragmatic issues, and Minimal Default Grammar allows subject omission (see Müller and Hulk’s (9)). Languages like Italian allow subject omission in the adult target. In languages like German, which typically do not allow subject omission, some evidence in the form of omitted subjects in imperatives and root infinitives is nonetheless available (Lasser, 1997), and could possibly mislead the child in his/her reanalysis from the pragmatics-based Minimal Default Grammar to the language-specific syntactic requirements at the onset of the C-system. It would be particularly interesting for Müller and Hulk to analyze subject and object drop simultaneously in German–Italian bilingual children, since their hypothesis would predict that the same child would be slower than monolinguals in learning about object drop in Italian and subject drop in German, while keeping pace with monolinguals in object drop in German and subject drop in Italian.

In summary, while I find Müller and Hulk’s ideas about
the relevance of the interface between syntax and pragmatics in the C-domain interesting, I would prefer to have more evidence of the type noted above before allowing myself to be convinced by their arguments. Note, however, that these concerns are relevant for the field as a whole and not just for Müller and Hulk.

In the rest of my commentary, I turn to the question of pragmatics and how relevant it is to Germanic–Romance bilingual children’s difficulties with object drop. In fact, Müller and Hulk spend almost no time in the article discussing the pragmatic factors that play a part in the child’s decision to drop an object. This is not unique to Müller and Hulk; rather, it is typical of much of the work noted in the second paragraph above. However, lack of information about which pragmatic factors are relevant makes it difficult for the reader to understand how pragmatics plays any part at all in acquisition of the structures at hand, and therefore how anything more than a change in understanding of syntactic constraints is important to the children’s skill with object drop.

Müller and Hulk’s appeal to pragmatics is summarized in a quotation following their example (9): “We suggest that in the early stages of acquisition all children use a pragmatic strategy to license the empty element (PRO) via discourse . . . . Discourse licensing is part of the set of default representations which all speakers possess and, as such is part of Minimal Default Grammar. The child’s task, during acquisition, is to find out what role discourse licensing plays in the specific target language.” They later show several examples in which “the empty object represents the discourse topic.” I repeat one of these examples (example (14a); repeated as (1) below) here for convenience, taken from Ivar at 2:6:6:

(1) A: tu as enlevé la musique? (= l’horloge) you have taken off the music (= clock)
   “Did you take off the clock?”
Iv: oui remets ici yes put back here
   “Yes, (I) put (it) back here.”

In this example, the object (the clock) was explicitly mentioned in the adult utterance immediately preceding the child’s utterance, and can thus be considered a topic for the child because it has now become salient in the minds of both speech act participants. An NP under such conditions is typically “reduced”: it is no longer realized in speech as a full NP, but rather as a pronoun or as a null element, depending on language-specific requirements. Minimal Default Grammar, like Chinese, allows realization of such an argument as a null element; French rather requires an overt pronoun.

The logic of realizing already-salient referents as pronouns or null elements is fairly clear. However, determining what is “already salient” is rather complex and involves the interaction of several different discourse-pragmatic factors. Unfortunately, Müller and Hulk don’t offer any detailed discussion of this, including how a child might come to understand what these factors are and how they affect argument realization. Müller and Hulk’s figures show that even at the youngest ages children aren’t omitting 100 percent of their arguments, which one might expect if they were applying Minimal Default Grammar indiscriminately. How do children know from the beginning which objects they can omit in accordance with discourse-pragmatic principles, and which they cannot? In other words, where is the pragmatics in the syntax–pragmatics interface hypothesis?

Recent work on language acquisition from a functionalist perspective has focused on determining just exactly what the discourse-pragmatic factors determining argument omission are. Greenfield and Smith’s (1976) “principle of informativeness” is usually cited as the starting point for this discussion — the idea that children tend to encode those aspects of the event that are most informative to the listener, and fail to encode those aspects of the event that can be taken for granted. Many authors in both functionalist and formalist traditions have concretized the notion of “informativeness” using the new–given distinction. Clancy (1997) has further developed this idea, including newness as well as three other features characterizing “informativeness” (absence, contrast, query), and person and animacy. She shows that two Korean children aged 1;8–2;10 omit arguments in their spontaneous speech much more frequently when the referent is first or second person, animate, and/or not “informative” (i.e. the referent has just been mentioned in discourse, is present in the physical context surrounding the interaction, is not explicitly contrasted with another similar referent, and is not being questioned). I have found similar results using logistic regression with spontaneous speech data from four Inuktut-speaking children aged 2;0–3;6 (Allen, 2000a). My subsequent work shows that in addition to pragmatic factors alone, the interaction between factors is also relevant (Allen, 2000b). I considered four factors — newness, contrast, absence, and differentiation in context (i.e. two potential referents for the same argument are present in the physical context) — and found that an argument representing a referent which is not “informative” for any of these factors was omitted in the children’s speech in 81.8 percent of cases. By comparison, arguments representing referents which were “informative” for only one of the factors (e.g. absent from the physical context but already mentioned in discourse and not explicitly contrasted) were omitted in 71.3% of cases, for two of the factors in 43.5% of cases, and for all of the factors in only 13.8% of cases. This indicates that children are indeed highly sensitive to various discourse-pragmatic factors in the discourse, and adjust their speech accordingly. My data is unfortunately not well suited to analyzing developmental trends since each child is only followed for nine months. However, this method of analysis would be quite illuminating in determining what factors are relevant for children at various stages of development, in determining what a topic is and which arguments may be omitted.

Given this background, it is not clear from Müller and Hulk’s work that pragmatics has to do with the Germanic–Romance children’s difficulties with object drop in anything but a superficial way. In fact, all the examples that Müller and Hulk give of target-deviant object drop are ones in which the pragmatics seems correct but the syntax
is wrong. In all 20 examples in which the object is incorrectly omitted, the object is translated in English as "it", suggesting that these are indeed pragmatically appropriate contexts for reduced arguments. In the three examples where the discourse context is given (i.e. (14)), the object is always mentioned explicitly in the immediately preceding utterance, which is a classic pragmatic condition permitting reduced arguments. By contrast, in the six examples of non-dropped objects (i.e. (12) and (13a',b',c')), the object is always a full NP which suggests that the object is not in a pragmatically appropriate context for reduced arguments. Thus, it appears that the problem is always with the syntax.

In the four monolingual Germanic examples, object drop is target-deviant because the verb is not in initial position (2a,3a) or because the subject is omitted as well as the object (2b,3b); presumably object omission by itself is perfectly fine. In the 16 monolingual and bilingual Romance examples, object drop is target-deviant because reduced arguments can only appear as pronouns in French. It is not apparent to me that any notion of syntax–pragmatics interface is relevant here, or that pragmatics itself is relevant in any interesting way. More attention to the pragmatics at the syntax–pragmatics interface would be most welcome.

In conclusion, I believe that Müller and Hulk have raised some very interesting questions for the relationship between syntax and pragmatics in language acquisition, whether monolingual or bilingual. I hope to have shown that more concrete investigation in the area of pragmatics would be one fruitful approach in pursuing these questions further.

References


