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Alba N. Ambert

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Identifying Language Disorders in Spanish-speakers

Alba N. Ambert

Historically and currently, limited English proficient (LEP) children have been placed in special education programs, not because they presented clearly established learning impairments, but because they were unable to meet school expectations for functioning in English (Mercer, 1971; Tucker, 1980; Zabel, 1980; Cummins, 1984). Others have been placed in special classes due to differences in language dialect and/or cultural differences (Ambert and Melendez, 1985). Many of these children are categorized as language disordered.

Complex linguistic issues affect the diagnosis of true language disorders in Spanish-speaking children living in bilingual settings. Hispanic children whose English and Spanish varies in form and function may be misidentified as language disordered, if evaluated in English before they have fully acquired mastery of that language. Despite the critical impact appropriate evaluation of English language proficiency has on LEP children's educational placement, it is often performed improperly. An accurate appraisal of English language proficiency requires examination of diverse variables such as rate of English language acquisition, native language influence, motivation, and nature of instructional program to which the child has been exposed. Another requirement is a global language assesment which

includes not only discrete items (syntax, semantics, morphology and phonology), but a child's communicative competence (the use of language for different purposes). Unless a complete assessment of English language proficiency is performed, Spanish-speaking children may appear to be fluent in English because they have acquired superficial aspects of the language. Use of English for assessment and instructional purposes with LEP children will reveal pseudo-deficits in language which are, in fact, simply gaps in the children's mastery of English at certain levels and not true language disorders at all. LEP children who do not exhibit true language impairments should not be classified as impaired solely because of limitations in English or because of cultural or dialectical differences.

In spite of these concerns, there are LEP children who do present true language disorders, and educational practitioners must meet the challenge of assessing these children appropriately. If a valid, non-discriminatory assessment is to take place, Hispanic children of limited English proficiency who appear to experience language disorders must be assessed in Spanish by clinicians with native-like fluency who are familiar with the regional variety of the language spoken in the children's linguistic community. However, little research has been done on the linguistic characteristics of Spanish-speaking, language-disordered children living in the United States. Lack of information makes it difficult for practitioners to effectively identify Spanish-speakers with true language disorders.

Linares-Orama (1977) studied the applicability of diagnostic measures for the evaluation of syntax in preschool Spanish-speaking youngsters to determine deviancy. The study compared the

performance of normal and language disordered three-year-old Puerto Rican children living in Puerto Rico. They were tested to determine whether the mean length of utterance and Lee's Developmental Sentence Scoring Procedure (1974) adapted for Spanish by Toronto (1972, 1976) were sensitive to the linguistic differences of Puerto Rican children within the three-year range. The results were positive.

Two groups of twenty-five Spanish-speaking children between the ages of six and eight were studied by Wyszewianski-Langdon (1977, 1983). One group was developing normally, the second group was composed of language disordered youngsters. A series of tests was administered to the children, in Spanish and English, in the areas of articulation of words, articulation in connected speech, auditory discrimination, sentence comprehension, sentence repetition and sentence expression. After an analysis of test results and comparisons between the groups, the author concludes that the language disordered group made more errors in both Spanish and English than the control group.

Merino (1983) compared and contrasted the language development of normal and language disordered Spanish-speaking children of limited English proficiency. A battery of tests was administered to fifty monolingual Spanish-speakers in Mexico to establish baseline data. The same battery was then administered to a group of twenty-two language disordered Spanish-speaking children in the United States. It was found that the language disordered group presented difficulties in oral production skills, but not in comprehension. Since comprehension was tested by asking the child to select one of two pictures, the results for the comprehension part of the

test were less dependable, according to the author. Merino concludes that significant differences in performance exist between the language disordered and non-language disordered children on the tests.

Pragmatic criteria were compared with traditional surface structure criteria in the diagnosis of language disorders in bilingual children in a study performed by Damico, et al. (1983). Spontaneous language samples were obtained from ten Spanish/English bilingual children between six and eight years of age who had been referred for special education evaluation. The language samples were examined for normalcy following structural and pragmatic criteria. According to the authors, results of the study indicate that the two sets of criteria identified different subgroups as language impaired and that the pragmatic criteria were more effective in predicting school achievement over a seven-month period.

These studies provide valuable information on the applicability of diagnostic measures adapted for Spanish-speakers and on the importance of utilizing pragmatic criteria with traditional structural criteria in assessing language-disordered children. They also provide comparisons of language-disordered Spanish-speakers and children who are developing Spanish normally. Nevertheless, we have much to explore concerning the nature and characteristics of true language disorders in Spanish-speaking children living in the United States.

The Study

The purpose of this investigation was to identify the characteristics of Spanish-speaking children living in the United States who have

true language disorders and who are of limited English proficiency. The study focused on the specific characteristics of these children's receptive and expressive language in Spanish. The influence of English on their linguistic development was considered, as well as dialectical differences in the Spanish spoken by the children involved in the study.

Subjects

A group of thirty Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican children, who were both LEP and language disordered, were selected for the study. The children were between the ages of five and twelve and attended public schools in Boston, Massachusetts, and Hartford, Connecticut. As determined by the school district's administration of the Language Assessment Scales in both English and Spanish, the children were Spanish-dominant. Home language surveys indicated that the primary language of their homes was Spanish. The children were identified as language disordered by qualified bilingual speech and language pathologists who were fluent in Spanish and familiar with the regional variety of Spanish spoken by the children. The children were not mentally retarded nor did they exhibit any physical impairments. Their language difficulties were not due to English language acquisition or bilingualism and were present in their native language. All of the children were participating in bilingual education programs.

Method

Spanish language samples were collected on the subjects' spontaneous speech production following Bloom and Lahey's language elicitation techniques (1978). At least one hundred different

utterances were collected for each child, using picture story books and a set of ten pictures to elicit language. The language samples were transcribed and analyzed for global linguistic performance, including structural analysis (phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics) and pragmatic analysis (meaningful verbal and non-verbal interaction). In analyzing the language samples, the developmental stages of Spanish language acquisition were considered. Specifically used for this purpose was Gili-Gaya's (1974) analysis of the manner in which fifty Puerto Rican children between the ages of four and seven used language as a communication tool and for representation of ideas. An analysis of syntactic structures used by the children was also done. Also used as a comparison was Ambert's (1985) study of thirty five-year-old Spanish-speaking children in Hartford, Connecticut, whose language was developing normally.

Results of the Study

The terms language disorders, language impairments and deviant language will be used interchangeably in this article to define a condition wherein a disruption in the learning of a native language occurs (Bloom and Lahey, 1978). Language processing and language production problems are evident in the language-disordered youngster (Wiig and Semel, 1976). Language-disordered children fail to make some of the linguistic generalizations necessary for appropriate use of syntactic and morphological structures (Leonard, 1972), and they appear to deviate from normal children in the frequency of usage of different grammatical structures. Menyuk (1975) confirms the breakdown of the internalization of the grammar, maintaining that language-disordered children are not simply delayed in the normal language

developmental process. Although they appear to lag behind normally developing age peers on different aspects of language, it should not be assumed that these children will in time acquire language as normal speakers. In addition, children with language disorders may have difficulty not only knowing the rules of appropriate language use, but also understanding the behaviors which correspond to language use (Carrow-Woolfolk and Lynch, 1982). They lack some of the discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence to communicate effectively (Kessler, 1984).

True language disorders identified in this study were categorized into disorders of receptive language and disorders of expressive language. The characteristics include structural language problems as well as pragmatic language difficulties. The disorders experienced by the children in this study were evident in their general linguistic development, which in this case was in Spanish. The developmental stages of Spanish language acquisition were considered when determining whether an utterance was normal or deviant. When a five-year old, for example, overgeneralized in the formation of verb tenses (using pusio instead of puso, that is, putted instead of put) or was unable to blend the p and l sounds (saying pato instead of plato in the Spanish word for plate), it was not counted as a language deviancy. When an eight-year old produced these types of errors, however, they were considered deviant. In addition, studies on the acquisition of Spanish as a first language were used to establish deviancy. Besides the Gili-Gaya (1974) and Ambert (1985) studies, which were used extensively, the following studies were used: Montes-Giraldo's (1971) study on the chronological emergence of linguistic structures in four Spanish-speaking children; Gonzalez's (1979) study of syntactical

features in Spanish-speaker's language; and Belendez's (1980) study of the pattern of acquisition of the Spanish verb system in Puerto Rican children. Linguistic differences which were dialectically motivated were not considered to be deviant.

Examples of the types of errors made by children who were between the ages of eight and twelve are presented on the following pages. In these examples, the child's utterance is given followed by a slash (/) and the correct form or the intended communication. For example, pusio/puso (putted/put) means the child said pusio instead of puso. If intent is obvious, it is not indicated. Because of the syntactical differences between Spanish and English, the translations are as accurate as possible, though not always exact. Errors were evident in both the receptive and expressive domains.

Receptive Language Disorders

The children in this study had intact auditory acuity, but could not process what they heard. They had difficulties establishing associations between words and meanings and in understanding questions, and had problems with auditory discrimination, word retrieval, and the ability to use gender agreement. Specific examples are as follows:

- The children were unable to associate sounds with objects or experiences. For example, some of the children could hear a word such as lapiz (pencil), but when asked dame el lapiz (give me a pencil), they would be unable to make the connection between the word and the object requested.

● The children could not discriminate tones, phonemes and morphemes.

tata/pata (duck)	pinto/pintor (painter)
eron/eran (were)	dio/dijo (said)
migo/amigo (friend)	dena/cadena (chain)

● The children were unable to remember words easily and often stumbled in their speech.

Child: entonces la cosa...¿cómo se dice esto?
(then the thing...how do you say this?)

Teacher: la cáscara (the peel)

Child: la cáscara/y lo. la cosa que tan cómo se dice?
(the peel/and the thing that so how do you say it?)

Teacher: la cáscara (the peel)

Child: y entonces la cosa aquella de adentro
(and then that thing there inside)

● The children experienced difficulties with gender agreement and with the use of appropriate grammatical markers for gender. (In Spanish, articles, adjectives, and pronouns carry grammatical markers which, in most cases, are either masculine or feminine.) According to Gili-Gaya (1974), by the age of four, children have consolidated the knowledge of gender which is learned through the association of each noun with the article, adjective and pronoun with which it agrees. The idea of this permanent association is tied in with the meaning of the noun and children of four years utilize gender without any problem, prior to their concept of the sexes. This is confirmed by Ambert's (1985) study of

five-year-olds. The following illustrates errors of gender found in the present sample (errors are underlined):

lo mama/la mama (the mother)
pieza esto/esta pieza (this piece)

Question: ¿Como se sintio la mama? (How did the mother feel?)

Child: Contento/contenta (happy)

● The children experienced pragmatic difficulties in their receptive language. They were unable to understand who, what, where, and why questions.

Question: ¿Quien se comio eso? (Who ate that?)

Child: sopa (soup)

Question: ¿Que rompio el nino? (What did the boy break?)

Child: Esta enferma (she's sick)

Question: ¿A donde fue Juan? (Where did Juan go?)

Child: Agriquitol (farmer)

Question: ¿Por que se mojo el lobo? (Why did the wolf get wet?)

Child: 'tornado (sneezed)

Expressive Language Disorders

A disorder of comprehension will necessarily affect verbal expression. Language comprehension is a skill which develops prior to full development of expressive language. Children who fail to understand do not use meaningful spoken language (Myklebust, 1954).

The language-disordered children in this study experienced varied expressive language disorders in articulation, syntax, semantics, and pragmatic language.

Articulation:

● The children often had difficulty pronouncing consonant sounds which require precise articulation, such as the s, l, r, and trilled r sounds, errors which were not consonant with their own speech community's language. For example, in the regional variety of Spanish spoken by Puerto Ricans, it is common to aspirate the s as in ehcuela instead of escuela (school) or casah instead of casas (houses). It is also a characteristic of the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico to transform the medial and final r into an l, as in puelco instead of puerco (pig) and miral instead of mirar (to look). These characteristics common in the Spanish spoken by Puerto Ricans should not be construed as language deviancy. They simply reflect a particular linguistic community's language usage. Errors made by the children in this study deviated from their own speech community's language patterns. For example, instead of aspirating the s, they would omit it entirely, and they would make inappropriate substitutions of the r and the trilled r as in the following examples:

plimo/primo (cousin)	cayo/carro (car)
canino/carino (affection)	bucala/buscarla
yompio/rompio (broke)	(look for)
	casa/casas (houses)

● The language-disordered children also substituted, omitted, and distorted sounds:

espierto/desperto (awoke)	seemdivo/se me olvido
otia/otra (another)	(I forgot)
losotro/nosotros (we)	guaba/guagua (bus)
	ajana/regana (scold)

- They reversed the order of sounds in words:

quichoto/chiquito (small)	tabaca/estaba (was)
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- and constricted words:

ah/agua (water)	cho/echo (put)
voa/voy a (I'm going to)	po/pero (but)

- They could not blend isolated sounds into meaningful segments, even though they could distinguish and produce such sounds as b, l, g, r, n, s, t:

anco/blanco (white)	motro/monstruo (monster)
binco/brinco (jumped)	pato/plato (plate)

Syntax:

Oral syntax disordered were evident in the children studied.

- They omitted essential parts of the grammar, such as articles, pronouns, prepositions, the copulas ser and estar, the reflexive pronoun se, and conjunctions:

casa mia es/esa casa es mia (that is my house)

muneco muneca/un muneco y una muneca (a doll and a doll)

contento/esta contento (is happy)

un queso/con un queso (with a cheese)

el fue/el se fue (he left)

mia muñeca/la muñeca es mia (the doll is mine)

- They used incorrect word order:

olvidó eso Luis/A Luis se le olvidó eso (Luis forgot that)

jirafa quiere él/él quiere la jirafa (he wants the giraffe)

Charlie Brown yo lo vi/yo vi a Charlie Brown
(I saw Charlie Brown)

- They substituted articles, pronouns and other grammatical structures with the schwa sound, which is written with the symbol ə and pronounced as the e in roses.

¿ə pegaron eso? ¿Quiénes pegaron eso? (Who pasted that?)

ə vuela/eso vuela (that flies)

ə pongo 'torio Luis/lo pongo en el escritorio de Luis (I put it in Luis' desk)

ə guardo hago esta/lo guardo y hago esta (I'll save it and do this one)

- They exhibited lack of noun-verb and article-noun agreement.

el sapo no puedan hablar/los sapos no puedan hablar (frogs cannot talk)

lo mamá/la mamá (the mother)

se cayó/se cayeron (they fell)

- They omitted plural endings.

dos árbol/dos árboles (two trees)

se montaron solo/se montaron solos (they got on alone)

tumbó flor/tumbó las flores (knocked down the flowers)

- They confused verb tenses.

pónelo/pónlos (put them)

viste/vi (I saw)

hació/hizo (made)

cayó las flores/las flores se cayeron (the flowers fell)

- Omission of the auxiliary estar in the present progressive form was common.

corriendo/está corriendo (is running)

jugando/está jugando (is playing)

Semantics:

The children in this study demonstrated difficulties with word meanings:

- They used inappropriate verbal labels for common objects, actions, and persons.

música/película (music/film)

radio/teléfono (radio/telephone)

hablar/sonreír (talk/smile)

niño/conejito (boy/bunny)

- They used circumlocution when they could not retrieve words.

papel que se usa pa'buscar en la tierra/mapa
(paper that's used to look in the ground/map)

una traba que se mece/columpio
(a board that sways/swing)

la luz que se cambia pa' cororá/semáforo
(the light that changes to red/traffic light)

no hace frío y hace calor/verano
(it's not cold and it's hot/summer)

● In the pragmatic area of expressive language disorders, the children had difficulties retelling stories or narrating personal experiences. They frequently depended on gestures and pointing to be understood.

Question: ¿Si? ¿Que te paso? Cuéntame.
(Really? What happened? Tell me.)

Child: No response.

Question: ¿A donde fue Juan? (Where did Juan go?)

Child: a la...como se dice eso? (to the...how do you say that?)

Question: ¿Te gustaba ordeñar la cabra? (Did you like to milk the goat?)

Child: Ajá.y entonces y pue cuando la cabla.
(Aha.and then and so when the goat.)

Question: ¿Cómo se llaman tus amigos? (What are your friends' names?)

Child: Yo no sé. (I don't know)

● The children had difficulty classifying events with verbal labels and organizing words in appropriate sentences.

y había soda por dentro que había una tiendita/
 había una tiendita que tenía soda
 (there was a store which had soda)

lo puso así [gestures] a que lo puso así y lo hizo
 bien
 (he put it like this [gestures] put it like this
 and did well)

● They were unable to correct grammatical errors in sentence constructions in many instances.

y la señora.am.le hizo a lo carro que paren/
 y la señora hizo que los carros pararan
 (the lady made the cars stop)

todo el lado/todos los lados
 (on all sides)

In addition to the linguistic deviations described, the use of idiomatic expressions was rare in the children studied, as was the use of adjectives, adverbs, possessive articles other than mi or mío, the use of the present progressive, prepositions, the reflexive se, the auxiliaries ser and estar, copulas ser and estar, and the periphrastic future (ir a + infinitive).

Although the Spanish-speaking language-disordered children described in this study were participating in English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) programs, the English language influence on their acquisition of Spanish was minimal. The only discernible English influence evident was in vocabulary. They used words such as Istel/Easter, estim/steam, matre/mattress, fensa/fence, listi/lipstick, hi and hall. It is common for Spanish-speakers living in the United States to use these English terms with a Spanish pronun-

ciation and their use is not indicative of a language disorder.

Conclusion

Hispanic children of limited English proficiency have been frequently misidentified as language disordered. This situation occurs when they are assessed in English, a language they do not master, or when they are observed in an all-English instructional program where their performance is judged against the performance of native speakers of the English language. Misidentification also occurs when Hispanic LEP children are assessed in Spanish by assessors who are not fluent in Spanish and/or not familiar with the regional variety of Spanish spoken by the child. Educational practitioners must exercise much caution and ascertain that the LEP children's assessments are performed in the native language by qualified bilingual professionals according to legal requirements and sound educational practices.

Since there are instances in which Hispanic LEP children experience linguistic difficulties in the native language due to a language impairment, it is essential that practitioners recognize the nature and characteristics of language impairments in Spanish-speaking children.

The purpose of the present study was to describe the characteristics of Spanish-speaking children with true language disorders to assist educators in appropriately identifying LEP Hispanic children who would benefit from a language intervention program.

It was found that the language of language disordered Hispanic children of limited-English

proficiency included in this study deviated from the language of Spanish-speaking children acquiring language normally. The children presented structural difficulties as well as pragmatic problems. The children studied were living in a bilingual setting, yet the impact of English on their language development was minimal.

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About the Author:

Dr. Alba N. Ambert was this past year a Visiting Scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Linguistics performing a study on language development and language disorders in Spanish-speaking children. She was the recipient of a National Research Council Fellowship while serving as Assistant Professor and Director of the Bilingual Special Education Teacher Training Program at the University of Hartford in Connecticut. Her most recent publication is Bilingual Education: A Sourcebook, which she co-authored with Sarah Melendez.