

“Yeah, yeah! ¡Sí, Sí!”

Competing English and Spanish interjections in bilingual people living with Alzheimer’s dementia

Keywords: Alzheimer’s Dementia, code choice, (non)selectivity, language impairment, emotion

The aging population is increasingly affected by neurocognitive diseases like Alzheimer’s Dementia (AD), hence it hardly surprising that the number of bi- and multilingual persons living with Alzheimer’s dementia (PWA) has increased, too. Studies on aphasia, language loss and how it could be retrieved has led to many theories about how the bilingual brain processes, produces and reconstructs languages; but aphasic impairments differ greatly from those caused by AD. PWA are often seen as a homogeneous group and with the onset of multiple symptoms of AD, language production is considered as being affected mainly on the level of semantic and pragmatic processing (cf. Ferris/Farlow 2013), leading to the generalizing assumption that PWA are no longer in control of their language capacities throughout the progression of the disease.

This qualitative study, by drawing on narrative interviews with bilingual PWA, analyzes English and Spanish interjections and their functions in discourse (cf. Wharton 2003), distinguishing primary (non-productive) and secondary (semantically independent) interjections (cf. Ameka 1992). Seeing interjections as mental acts which express a specific state of mind (cf. Meinard 2014), this study particularly focuses on the language choice (L1/L2) (cf. Bailey 2007) of the interjection itself, on the language of the co-text, as well as the emotional value of the content discussed in the interview. Further, interjections neither categorized as English nor Spanish (e.g. onomatopoeias) are contextually studied. Code choice in interjections is also discussed in the light of the twin hypothesis (cf. de Bot/Clyne 1994), arguing that elder bilinguals tend to revert to their L1 while they experience language attrition in L2; a trend that can be supported by evidence of PWA’s language production. In sum, this paper investigates interjections as emotional reactions to an immediate situation while taking into account the speaker’s language biography and the contextually important co-text.

References

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