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The functional relevance of native language  
in proficiency assessment

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Based on a variety of observations already well reported in the literature, it appears safe to assert that there exists a fundamental difference between first and second language acquisition. Whether one approaches the matter from a psychological, sociological, linguistic or philosophical viewpoint, the facts themselves speak for the difference, regardless of the methods used to characterize it. The magic age of puberty has been chosen as the ontogenetic point of no return, after which native-level competence is difficult if not impossible to obtain, and many have even attempted to find neurophysiological correlates which would corroborate the more anecdotal observations upon which the cutoff point has been established. Nonetheless, despite the difficulties inherent in the second language learning process, it is commonly assumed that, in the normal linguistically successful individual, native-level competence does at last emerge from the ashes of first-language interference, at least in the realm of the syntactic component of the grammar. In the areas of phonology, particularly intonation, and semantics, vestiges of native-language transfer remain to plague even the most determined language learner, to a greater or lesser extent, evidently depending mainly on idiosyncratic factors.

Remaining strictly within the confines of the syntactic component, we may therefore affirm that the final point in second language acquisition is a grammar which is nearly or totally convergent with that of native speakers; it may conceivably be possible for second language learners to develop the entire range of connotations and intuitions enjoyed by native speakers, although due to the sociolinguistic matrix in which such values are embedded, this rarely occurs in the absence of extensive residence among speakers of the language in question. Given this postulated ultimate convergence, one may therefore wish to address the question of the nature of the intervening stages in the acquisition process, to determine the extent to which the process of second-language acquisition duplicates the development of the native language. Studies of the acquisition of (first) language abound, and whereas there remain many points of theoretical and methodological controversy, the approximate stages characterizing the formation of the adult grammatical system have been well described for a number of languages. On the other hand, studies relating to the acquisition of a second language subsequent to, rather than together with, the first language are few and far between, despite the obvious implications in a number of related disciplines, including language pedagogy, psycholinguistics and language testing.

Fundamental to the above prologue is the distinction between basically self-acquired competence in a foreign language, arrived at, for example, by extensive residence in another country, and formal language instruction, in some organized body of learning. The former case, in which an individual haphazardly patches together a grammar from bits and pieces obtained at random from his daily experience, appears to be so

highly idiosyncratic that preliminary generalization is impossible; it appears rather that extensive case histories tracing the process in a number of individuals will be required before any valid observations may be effected. On the other hand, formal second-language instruction, being by definition structured and replicatable, offers fertile territory for exploration into the stages of language acquisition characterizing the language student. The end result of a programmed course of instruction in a foreign language is the attainment of a specified degree of competence in that language, and the textbooks and curricular materials are generally structured so as to achieve these goals as efficiently as possible. That considerable uncertainty as to the most efficient method of proceeding still exists is attested by the variety of approaches which may be encountered for instruction in most of the commonly taught languages. Equally heterogeneous are the testing procedures designed to assess the putative competence, although in this area there is a higher level of agreement among authorities as to what constitutes an acceptable level of competence. Such tests, while frequently designed by native speakers of the target language, nonetheless are largely based upon points of interference with the students' native language, and consequently place special emphasis on those constructions, concepts and patterns which for one reason or another have been found to engender problems of native-language transfer. The end result may be an inventory of grammatical difficulties, combined with materials designed to probe in a general fashion the students' mastery of the language.

Less frequently, in establishing testing norms and textual materials, are simultaneous comparisons made between the performance of typical students, and the performance of 'typical' native speakers of the target language, that is, speakers removed from the highly normative and super-educated environment of the language pedagogy programs. When such comparisons are performed, the results are at times unusual, and in all instances highly instructive.

As a case in point, we shall consider a state-mandated proficiency exam in Spanish, designed for public school teachers seeking a bilingual teaching endorsement to the basic certificate. The testing team, of which the present writer was a member, designed the multi-stage test along the grounds of standardized tests, but with a view toward the practical language competence required by a public school teacher rather than the somewhat more esoteric knowledge probed by some of the college-level examinations. Since the teachers were not to teach Spanish, but rather to be able to explain some other subject material to students coming from a Spanish-speaking home, it was felt that less attention should be paid to fine grammatical points which, while constituting part of the prescriptive norms of the Spanish language, nonetheless play a small actual role in determining effective communication of fundamental ideas. On the other hand, the level of competence sought after among the candidates was significantly higher than the pidgin-like speech which constitutes the communicative minimum in bilingual encounters; in practice, the level of acceptability reached by the panel of evaluators was roughly equivalent to fourth-year university Spanish courses.

The examination consists of three parts. Part I contains multiple choice grammar and usage questions plus a reading comprehension section, followed by a number of school-oriented sentences which the candidates have to effectively render (but not necessarily directly translate) into Spanish. Part II tests listening comprehension, and consists of a series of taped interviews between parents, students and other school personnel, followed by several questions to which the candidates must properly respond.

Part III represents a synthesis of the communicative abilities being tested, and involves a face-to-face interview between the candidate and several native speakers of Spanish, the entire encounter being observed and evaluated by a team of judges. Part I, providing the greatest amount of standardized data, will serve as the primary basis for the following remarks.

The question of language dominance testing arises naturally when considering the implementation of a bilingual program, since prospective teachers are required to demonstrate a sufficient ability in the Spanish language in order to adequately function in the environment of the bilingual classroom or counseling situation. In the present instances, the testing was not specifically directed at language dominance; it was assumed that each individual being tested knew both Spanish and English, to a degree unknown in advance, although held within practical limits by the exigencies of the school system or by the nature of the university life which formed the social milieu of the remaining candidates. Nor was the testing to involve relative abilities in English, since this would form part of a different component of the program, namely the ESL element of the bilingual education methodology. In the case brought before the members of our department, the task was a simple one: to determine the abilities of a group of candidates to function effectively in spoken and written Spanish, to whatever extent and at whatever level was agreed upon as constituting a realistic and relevant set of goals.

While the nature of this particular testing situation is rather atypical when compared with more traditional language dominance testing, it is nonetheless not widely removed from the functional nature of more common situations involving adults, and is not even that widely divergent from proficiency testing situations encompassing children. For these reasons, it is possible to interpret data gleaned from assessing the language abilities of the teacher candidates as indicative of more general trends of linguistic abilities. The ramifications are numerous and lead in nearly every conceivable direction. For the purposes of this analysis, the most pertinent results concern certain relative areas of grammatical skill evidenced by the performance of candidates on the exam.

In advance, one may propose certain hypotheses about general results to be obtained when dealing with a diverse group of subjects, whose language backgrounds range from virtually monolingual English to virtually monolingual Spanish, whose formal training ranges from doctoral level work in Spanish to a total lack of formal education in that language. It is to be expected, for example, that considerable variation will be found in the abilities in the Spanish language among the subjects, particularly as regards actual written production. While Spanish is much more nearly a phonetically-written language than English, it is still nearly impossible for someone with no formal education in Spanish to properly write the language. Moreover, one would readily anticipate that among uneducated speakers of Spanish, there would appear a greater variety of colloquial, vulgar and regional expressions, often mixed inextricably with more universally acceptable specimens of the language. With regard to the question of possible differences among speakers coming from a Spanish language background and an English language background, one runs into a more controversial area in speculating in advance what sort of differential results, if any, should be obtained. In fact, this question revolves around the issue of the types of bilingualism (coordinate and compound), the differences between first and second language acquisition and, perhaps separable from the latter point, the order in which languages are acquired. It is a debated point, for example, whether an individual who has learned a second language as an adult may ever become truly bilingual, in the sense of manipulating both languages

with equal facility. It is also obvious that bilinguals are not produced in normal school foreign language programs, although it is certainly possible to produce a student with a high level of linguistic ability. Given these considerations, one might postulate that, at least on certain areas of a foreign language proficiency test, native speakers of English would do more poorly than native Spanish speakers, in a fashion consistent with the amount of exposure they have had to Spanish. As for any differences between those who acquired Spanish as a second language through formal means as opposed to those who picked up the language in an ad hoc fashion, the most natural prediction would be that the latter group might exhibit a greater knowledge of colloquial varieties of the language, and might also evidence some of the same orthographical and technical difficulties characterizing the less educated among the Spanish speaking.

The above assumptions, while by no means uncontroversial, are those made by most practitioners of Spanish testing. On the other hand, implicit among nearly all those who have constructed or administered language proficiency exams is the assumption that it is possible to establish absolute scales of language proficiency, as determined by scores on standardized examinations, that will be valid for all subjects who may take the examinations. Since such tests nearly always involve a mechanical grading procedure for part or all of the final score computation, this assumption is equivalent to the notion that language proficiency amounts to the ability to consistently produce a certain fixed percentage of grammatically 'correct' utterances during the linguistic output. In other words, it is theoretically irrelevant what particular mistakes are made, as long as an overall level of accuracy, determined statistically, is maintained.

Put in these terms, few testers would agree that language proficiency is so subject independent, nor so independent of the types of errors produced. It is obvious, for example, that different type-forms of errors are produced by native speakers of a particular language as opposed to those who learned that language as a foreign tongue. The study of such differences forms the basis for contrastive linguistics, an important component of the the modern language pedagogical algorithm. Nonetheless, while it is recognized, when the problem is stated explicitly, that the intermediate stages of partial competence leading to proficiency in a language are different when first- or second-language acquisition is involved, it is still a commonly held working assumption that once an overall level of proficiency has been obtained, the original language background of the individual subjects should be ignored; this is in fact taken as the very definition of proficiency.

Returning to the testing situation forming the basis for these observations, it was not possible to conduct a controlled experiment, and therefore the results to be reported below stem from a naturally heterogeneous testing population. Testing subjects were administered the three portions of the exam in strict order, and the first portion had to be passed before one went on to the second, and so forth. For this reason, there are some individuals who were unsuccessful in passing the first, written grammatical, portion of the exam, and who consequently were never examined in aural/oral skills. In some cases, it was possible to informally assess oral proficiency, but no formal data resulted.

With regard to the hypotheses mentioned earlier (which, it must be added, were not necessarily all made by each member of the testing staff at the time the testing was actually taking place), it was possible to observe the predicted differences between native speakers of Spanish and English on various components of the exam. In the oral comprehension

portion, native Spanish speakers exhibited no difficulty in understanding the tapes, while some native English speakers, who had scored impressively high on the written grammar test, failed to adequately comprehend the spoken language, thus hinting at a formal background which placed greater emphasis on written expression. A similar disparity was evidenced in the final portion, although those native English speakers who had progressed to this stage frequently exhibited a truly impressive command of spontaneous spoken Spanish. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the interview situation, it was not possible to tape or otherwise record the sessions, and thus no accurate data are available concerning errors committed in the spoken language. Errors were jotted down as they occurred, and as a general rule, seem to conform to predictable patterns of interference from English, in the case of non-native speakers, and of various regionalisms and colloquialisms in the case of native Spanish speakers.

An overview of the orthographical parameters of the subjects' responses also reveals a commonly occurring phenomenon, suggested earlier. Native English speakers who had studied Spanish formally were generally quite accurate as regards orthographic norms, particularly in the fastidious placement of diacritic symbols. Next in line were those Spanish speakers who had received formal training in their language. Those who had received high school or university training in a Spanish-speaking country normally did essentially as well as the English-trained students in matters of orthographic accuracy. Finally, those with little formal training in Spanish committed the standard orthographic errors typical of minimal literacy in Spanish, such as the confusion of homophonous letters, omission or incorrect placement of diacritic marks, and incorrect morphological division due to the non-prominence of morpheme boundaries in spoken Spanish. In general, a low degree of orthographic accuracy was found among all speakers with little or no formal training in Spanish, with little regard to their native language background, although subjects trained in the United States often did slightly better. This is most likely an artefact of the American educational system, where a minimal exposure to phonetics as it relates to spelling is frequently a part of the curriculum. In addition, a comparatively large portion of Americans have at least a passive awareness of general spelling tendencies in Spanish, a fact which becomes apparent when meeting students in beginning language classes with no previous formal exposure to Spanish. This problem remains open-ended, since most of the Spanish-speaking candidates had also received much of their formal schooling in the United States. The only possible differentiating factor that comes readily to mind is the inferior language education often provided to Spanish-speaking Americans, particularly before the advent of comprehensive bilingual education programs.

The taped oral/aural portion of the text consists of a series of interchanges between Spanish speakers from different areas, engaged in conversations about everyday topics. The style is as natural as possible, and although excellent recording facilities were employed, no attempt was made to force an unnaturally slow or overenunciated diction, the goal being the comprehension of the natural flow of speech. From the nature of the listening task, it is not possible to determine specific areas of lack of comprehension, but general categories of errors, together with comments made by candidates following the test suggest several areas of difference. Those whose native language background was Spanish had little trouble with this portion, although some complained of the inability to totally understand speakers of some dialects, particularly those representing the Caribbean. Among native English speakers, there appears to be a natural gradient of

ability, roughly correlated with the quantity of exposure to spoken Spanish in real communication situations. Those candidates with foreign travel experience, or who had worked among or lived with native Spanish speakers performed significantly better than those students who had received only formal schooling not augmented by a field experience. Differences in comprehension ability were of a quite general nature: those students whose overall aural comprehension skills were not adequate to the task at hand took recourse to the only language processing strategies available under such conditions, namely grasping for any recognizable key words and attempting to extrapolate or guess at the appropriate meaning. Important meaning changing function words such as prepositions, particles, and morphological endings were often missed, with the result that while the overall nominal and verbal configurations of the sentence were correctly processed, substantial misinterpretations resulted from failure to process all the various semantic interconnections. These misinterpretations were frequently of a transformational nature, e.g. an affirmative sentence substituted for a negative, and less frequently due to a simple misunderstanding of a single lexical item.

In view of the smooth gradient of response indicating aural comprehension abilities, it may be surmised that this type of testing procedure, at least in this particular case, should yield results valid for both language groups. This is to say, if overall standards of proficiency are set in advance, it may be stated that performance seems to be a quasi-linear function of total exposure to the spoken language, i.e. that the predominant parameter of linguistic competence and proficiency outweighs any extraneous variables. This is definitely not the case, for example in the area of orthographic accuracy, where significant differences may be observed among speakers from the two language groups.

The multiple-choice questions of part I range through all significant linguistic categories, including vocabulary accuracy and extent, grammatical concordance, and an overall level of precision and coherence, as well as seeking out responses to specific grammatical problems, such as verb tense and modal usage, correct employment of prepositions, pronouns, comparatives, numerals, and other areas typically regarded as essential elements of the Spanish language. On the whole, the questions were of a non-trivial, yet common nature, although a few questions crept in which tested points of grammar perhaps finer than was demanded by the situation. These were usually weeded out during pretesting on native Spanish and English speakers which preceded the administration of each test.

Based on macrocategories, results on this portion were uniformly highest among those who had received considerable formal schooling in a Spanish-speaking country. These individuals combine native proficiency with a knowledge of grammar sufficient to distinguish grammatically acceptable utterances from those containing unacceptable deviations. Following as a rather close second come individuals who, although coming from an English language background, have received substantial formal training in Spanish. Bringing up the rear come those speakers with little or no formal training in Spanish, with few significant differences as regards native language background. It is thus apparent that the test (as was implicit in the design criteria) is selective towards the educated speaker, which is one of the provisions of the state mandate. On the other hand, the exam contains no overt elements that would discriminate against those who have studied the language with certain pedagogical techniques as opposed to others; for example, no mention was made of grammatical terms such as 'subjunctive', 'preposition', etc. Subjects merely had to select the

correct response, always a Spanish utterance, from amidst a list of choices.

Following the collection of the available data, a rough error-analysis was performed on the multiple-choice portion to determine which categories and types of errors were most frequent, and to begin a differentiation based on native language. Although the exams themselves were graded mechanically, it was possible, through prior or subsequent personal interviews, to obtain the necessary information on personal background, including language and formal education in English and Spanish. The following will report a series of general results, both expected and unexpected in view of the projections made earlier.

Vocabulary depth and accuracy. Although the number of vocabulary questions on the exam was relatively small, the results give little reason to suspect a significant difference based on language background. Vocabulary acquisition is probably the easiest and most straightforward measure of exposure to a language, and even those who were only marginally proficient in overall terms frequently possessed a rather large vocabulary. The only problem is the typical one of variant terms for the same concept, occurring among dialects and styles of Spanish. Although extensive pretesting among native Spanish speakers from various dialects eliminated those vocabulary items felt to be unfamiliar outside of some geographically limited regions, there were still a few Spanish-speaking subjects, usually raised in the United States, who were totally unfamiliar with a few terms. This reflects the lack of large scale exposure to the Spanish language which results from being raised in an environment where comparatively few speakers maintain the language, and where there is no extensive contact with current sources of linguistic material.

Recognition of general grammatical categories. Questions of this type include recognition of various forms of concordance, including noun-adjective agreement, verb-subject agreement, and choice of verbal tenses from among widely differing categories. It was found that the majority of candidates were able to manipulate these basic syntactic and morphological structures, which are so fundamental as to be present in the linguistic abilities of all but the least proficient. However, even given the fact that a written exam allows for retrospection and reconsideration, there was a slight tendency for some English speakers to miss a few cases of concordance, or a similar usage.

Idiomatic expressions. More than in the area of simple vocabulary, idiomatic expressions form part of the fundamental knowledge of the native speaker. However, due to significant differences between the structures of Spanish and English in the most common such expressions, they are frequently drilled in school and found in the majority of Spanish textbooks. For this reason, fewer errors were evidenced among native English speakers when it came to recognizing and using typical Spanish idiomatic expressions.

More recondite grammatical points. These include finer points of Spanish grammar generally stressed in second-year grammar courses. An attempt was made to eliminate from the test those points so fine as to be unknown to even large numbers of native Spanish speakers, although in such cases there is an inevitable lack of agreement as to what constitutes a necessary grammatical rule. Items in this category include certain uses of neuter pronouns and some special cases of usage of prepositions and demonstratives. Here it was found that the primary split in response was one of formal education versus no formal education in Spanish. In a few instances, non-native speakers of Spanish did better than nearly all native Spanish speakers, even those educated in Spanish; this indicates the continued existence of certain grammatical distinctions which are being artificially maintained through



textbooks and which are not recognized and practiced by the majority of non-pedantic native speakers.

It is in the area of fine grammatical distinctions that language testing runs into a great deal of difficulty, for it is often hard to determine, without large scale pretesting, precisely what grammatical distinctions are actually valid in a given speech community. Numerous sociolinguistic considerations enter into play, and, particularly in Spanish, which is still dominated by the official authority of the Royal Academy, it is often impossible to find any written acknowledgement that certain prescribed 'rules' are in fact not followed in everyday speech, some being virtually non-existent for as much as a century or more.

On the other hand, the fact that certain grammatical distinctions sanctioned by grammarians may not be made by all native speakers does not necessarily render such topics invalid for language tests. It does, however, introduce an additional complicating factor that must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. In order to illustrate this situation and spotlight the extent of functional differences in observed language competence between native and non-native speakers, we shall consider one particular grammatical point which came up on our exam, namely the use of the Spanish subjunctive.

The viable existence of the Spanish subjunctive is often felt to be one of the major characteristics of the Spanish language vis-à-vis English. Typically a third or more of the scholastic year in foreign language classes is spent on a detailed perusal of the subjunctive; entire books have been written on the subject and professional journals abound with articles on the theory and practice of the subjunctive in each of its varied uses. The assumption underlying the majority of pedagogical treatments is that the subjunctive is a truly valid and viable part of modern Spanish, both in the written and in the spoken varieties, and that native speakers generally manipulate the subjunctive without difficulty, except for random production errors unrelated to the choice of grammatical mood. It is conceded, in more advanced treatments, that there are certain fine points where the language is in a state of flux, with the subjunctive alternating with the indicative; in a few cases, one even finds reference to the fact that for a large number of grammatical constructions typically requiring the subjunctive, Spanish offers alternative constructions, usually employing an infinitive, which are chosen preferentially by rank and file native speakers, sometimes even in cases which are grammatically deviant, in the sense of official Academy dogma. However, such admissions are rare, particularly in foreign language classrooms, and no one has been so bold as to suggest that the Spanish subjunctive may be entering a moribund phase, especially since the subjunctive is still very much alive in imperative forms. Moreover, a glance at any specimen of written Spanish suffices to indicate that, at least in this mode, the subjunctive still survives without difficulty. It is for this reason that so much emphasis is placed on the mastery of the subjunctive, in all its intricacies. It is also for this reason that American students, providing they have learned their lessons well, emerge from their Spanish classes with a high degree of mechanical proficiency in the use of the subjunctive, although they may still not have a native-like feel for some of the more subtle cases, where emotional nuances are indicated by choice of mood.

In preparing the Spanish proficiency test, the testers acted under the tacit assumption that educated non-native speakers of Spanish would do reasonably well on questions involving the subjunctive, while those who had not mastered the subject matter would do poorly; in fact, the ability to

correctly manipulate the subjunctive is often equated, by Spanish language teachers (regardless of native language background) with proficiency in Spanish. On the other hand, it was assumed that native Spanish speakers would by and large have little difficulty with the subjunctive, in the relatively straightforward cases present on the test. The results, however, have not been in total conformity with the assumptions.

While the expected division among non-native speakers was indeed observed, results were not equally consistent in the case of native speakers. It was found, for example, that native Spanish speakers who have received little or no formal schooling in their language were often barely able to use the subjunctive, except in the case of imperatives (which take different syntactic configurations and hence are not intuitively thought of as being part of the subjunctive paradigm). More educated native speakers, while exhibiting greater mastery of the subjunctive, still frequently scored lower on these questions than native English speakers. Noteworthy exceptions were those Spanish speakers who were also professional language teachers. In view of the typical patterns of Spanish-language pedagogy in this country, these results are not too surprising. Of greater interest are the data on rudimentary implicational scales which may be established on the basis of the test results. While insufficient data exist to establish extensive sets of implicational formulae, it is still possible to enunciate certain general implicational relationships holding among various categories on the text. For example, while vocabulary depth and range is seen to be a fairly reliable determiner of overall language ability, the implicational direction is reversed with regards to subjunctive usage depending upon the speakers in question. For English speakers who have studied Spanish, proficiency in the subjunctive appears to precede attainment of great vocabulary depth, while among educated Spanish speakers, though in some cases there is a nearly total independence of the two parameters, there is a tendency for the opposite implication to hold: that extensive vocabulary acquisition precedes a detailed command of the subjunctive. Thus it is that, for example two individuals, one a native speaker of English and one a native speaker of Spanish, can each receive comparable scores on a vocabulary test, and may both be judged in general terms as roughly equivalent in terms of proficiency in Spanish, while exhibiting differing internal implications with regard to specific grammatical structures. There are several possible interpretations for this discrepancy, any or all of which may have contributed to the particular results under consideration. The most obvious contender is the relatively greater emphasis placed on mastery of the subjunctive in foreign language classrooms, whereas native Spanish speakers learn the subjunctive only as one more part of the entire grammatical apparatus of their language. If this were the only reason, however, it would be a simple enough matter to redesign the test, eliminating the excessive emphasis on the subjunctive, in order to bring the grammatical exercises more in line with the rules actually observed by native Spanish speakers. When one adds to the data, however, scores obtained by the relatively uneducated in Spanish, coming from both native language backgrounds, the matter becomes more complex. While too few data have been collected to offer totally definitive conclusions, there is an observable tendency for native English speakers to do somewhat better than native Spanish speakers on subjunctive usage, all other variables being equal, even though neither group has received formal training in Spanish. These results, if valid (and a more extensive formal evaluation is currently being planned), would indicate the presence of more than mere differences in educational background and exposure to certain pedagogical systems. They would carry the deeper implication that, in some sense, different

forms of linguistic competence are being tested in each case. That is to say that, all other things being equal (a situation rarely obtainable in practice), the subjunctive plays a different functional role in the internal grammar of the native Spanish speaker than it does in the acquired grammar of the English language speaker with roughly equivalent proficiency level in Spanish. The precise implications of this potential difference are as yet unclear, but it is apparent that, once the question of language proficiency is separated into different components, the native language background of the speaker may play a significant role. It is not immediately obvious why such a state of affairs should hold, in the light of many currently accepted models of grammatical competence, which have normally been extended integrally to include bilingual speakers. If one assumes that the bilingual speaker (and here the term 'bilingual' is being used rather loosely to include anyone with a reasonable ability in two languages) exhibits two completely distinct grammars, one for each of the languages he speaks, then there is no logical reason why a differing first language should produce differential results regarding certain specific elements of grammatical competence. On the other hand, if one tends toward the view that bilingual competence, whether dealing with two languages acquired nearly simultaneously or with clear first + second language sequences, represents an amalgam of the two languages in which certain functional interconnections are maintained between the two languages, it becomes somewhat easier to deal with such phenomena as the structured nature of bilingual code-switching, as well as with possible implicational differences among grammatical structures.

The differing implicational vectors designated above may be a result of ontogenetic differences, that is, of the manner in which certain grammatical elements are learned in both first and second language environments. On the other hand, there may be deeper structural reasons which account for the implicational differences; for example, in Spanish, the subjunctive rises to a much greater grammatical prominence in the face of the entire language than does the equivalent type of structure in English. Therefore, an individual coming from an English language background would perhaps pay special attention, maybe only on a subliminal level, to a structure which is so unlike anything in his own native language. On the other hand, to the Spanish speaker, the subjunctive is not nearly so unique or remarkable, since he takes the forms for granted as being part of the basic constituents of his language with which he is accustomed to dealing. Therefore, the acquisition or ignoring of the subjunctive for the Spanish speaker may receive comparatively less ontogenetic time and attention than occurs when the English speaker first becomes acquainted with Spanish.

At the present time these are merely speculations, and cannot be resolved from the limited information available. One thing is clear, however, and that is that assessing language proficiency in bilingual speakers, regardless of the nature and extent of their bilingualism, may be qualitatively different from language assessments in monolingual speakers. In the case of bilinguals who have acquired two languages at approximately the same time, one encounters the split between compound and coordinate bilingualism, and the concomitant necessity of establishing whether the internal grammatical competence of such speakers is to be characterized as two essentially distinct grammars or as one more nearly unified amalgam containing elements of the two languages. In the case of bilingual speakers whose second language was acquired a considerable time after the first, particularly after adolescence, the ontogenetic process of the second language, at least in the earlier stages, is definitely a superposition of one grammatical system upon another, in the sense that one does not start learning a second language

with a tabula rasa for internal competence. It is precisely for this reason that contrastive studies are employed in second-language teaching, to mitigate the effects of the first language upon the second. A logical consequence of this process of language acquisition is that certain grammatical structures in the second language may be arranged, relative to each other, in different fashions in the speaker's internal competence than in the case of a native speaker of the language in question. The results from the Spanish proficiency test would seem to suggest such a situation. Therefore, in preparing language testing materials for speakers of varying native language backgrounds, it may become necessary to consider not only levels of linguistic achievement, but also more specific language-internal functional relationships, which will in turn dictate the nature of the individual questions that may be employed with a reasonable assurance of validity.

#### Note

- 1 For a review of the theories of bilingual competence, and some additional suggestions, see J. Lipski, 'Code-switching and the problem of bilingual competence', presented to the LACUS Forum, Montreal, 1977. To be published in the LACUS Yearbook.