

# Chapter 7

## Complex Structures in the Child-Directed Speech of Native and Nonnative Speakers

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Children in bilingual communities are frequently exposed to speech from nonnative speakers, but little research has described how that input might differ from the input of native speakers. There is evidence that input from nonnative speakers might be less useful to language learning children, but little research has asked why. This chapter analyzes the frequency of complex structures in the child-directed speech of 30 native English speakers and 36 nonnative speakers who were late learners of English, all speaking English to their two-and-a-half-year-old children. All instances of nine categories of complex structures were coded in transcripts of mother-child interaction. The frequency of all but one category was greater in the speech of native speakers. These findings suggest that input provided by native speakers provides more frequent models of complex structures than nonnative input.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is well established in the literature on monolingual development that children's language skills reflect the quantity and quality of their language experience. This is no less true of bilingual children (Hoff & Core, 2013). One feature of the language

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experience of many bilingual children is exposure to nonnative speakers. In immigrant bilingual populations, parents often speak with their children in a late-acquired second language. Studies of Spanish-English bilingual children in immigrant families in the U.S. have found that the majority of many children's English exposure comes from nonnative English speakers (Place & Hoff, 2011; 2015), and several sources of evidence suggest that the input provided by native speakers is more supportive of children's language development than the input provided by nonnative speakers.

The debate about native skills (NS) versus non-native skills (NNS) and the different input they provide has always been a topic for debate. Several studies of second language acquisition (SLA) and use have focused on native speaker/non-native speaker (NS-NNS) conversation and its role in the acquisition process (Long, 1983). Even speakers who may be considered "fluent" in a second language due to their mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of that language may still lack pragmatic competence; in other words, they may still be unable to produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate (Tanck, 2002).

In the present paper, we focus on the frequency and types of complex structures in non-native child-directed speech (CDS) for two reasons. One, previous research found that the frequency and diversity of syntactic structures in children's input predicts children's vocabulary and syntactic development (Naigles & Huttenlocher, Waterfall, Vasilyeva, Vevea & Hedges, 2010; Valian, 2013). Two, we hypothesize that non-native speakers may show reduced use of complex sentences compared to native speakers. The structures to be analyzed are relative clauses, embedded clauses, and other grammatically complex structures. The aim is to ask if their use and frequency in child-directed speech differs between the native English and non-native English of native Spanish bilingual mothers.

## **PREVIOUS STUDIES**

### **The Role of Complex Syntax in Children's Input**

The frequency of complex structures in input is positively related to children's lexical and grammatical development. Marchman et al. (2016) worked on caregiver talk to young Spanish-English bilinguals and they reported a critical role of verbal engagement between caregivers and children in shaping children's early language outcomes in both of the languages they were learning. Huttenlocher et al. (2010) found, in a study of caregiver input and language growth between 14-46 months, caregiver clausal diversity and number of caregiver uses of complex clauses both predicted children's clausal diversity. More generally, it has been argued that the human language processor is sensitive to frequency (Bybee & Hopper, 2001; Ellis,

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