

Suzanne Aalberse, University of Amsterdam,

Francesca Moro, University of Leiden,

Josje Verhagen University of Amsterdam

The hyperextension of aspect marking in heritage Chinese and Ambon Malay in the Netherlands: one phenomenon, multiple causes

We investigate the use of an optional phenomenon in many heritage languages, namely progressive marking. We report on an oral description task of 29 clips targeting specific forms of lexical aspect (part of the Traces of Contact corpus PI Pieter Muysken). The five activity clips displayed events that were ongoing and did not have an endpoint (e.g., swimming); the 10 accomplishment clips displayed events that involved duration, but had a clear endpoint (e.g., cut off the branch of a tree), the fourteen achievement clips displayed punctual events with a clear endpoint (e.g., kicking a ball once). We tested first generation speakers and heritage speakers of Ambon Malay and Mandarin Chinese in the Netherlands in comparison to homeland speakers. We analyze the interaction between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect. We show that some first generation and heritage speakers in the Netherlands show hyperextension of the progressive. We contrast sociolinguistic profiles of speakers who overgeneralize the progressive with speakers who do so to a much lesser extent.

An influential line of research in L1 and L2 aspect acquisition assumes that that inherent aspect influences and limits the distribution of aspect markers in interlanguage (Andersen & Shirai 1994). This Aspect Hypothesis has also been an important subject of study in the field of heritage languages, proposing that heritage speakers may display such “interlanguage features” as a result of incomplete acquisition and attrition. Following the line of the Aspect Hypothesis, we analyzed how informants described videos depicting events that could be classified as either states, achievements, accomplishments, or activities. As expected, states did not elicit progressives at all, across speakers and languages. Videos with ongoing activities were described most often with the use of progressive markers, across languages and speakers.

Most remarkable was the finding that completely viewed accomplishments and even some achievements were described with progressives. The use of progressive *zai* to describe an accomplishment as in example (1) below is ungrammatical in Mandarin, yet this marker occurred in the descriptions of heritage speakers. Similarly, in Ambon Malay (see example 2) the use of *ada* although not ungrammatical is infelicitous:

(1) *You-ge nüsheng zai si-po yi-tiao bu
exist-CL girl ZAI tear-break one-CL cloth
'A girl is tearing apart a piece of cloth.'

(2) nona ada robek kain dalam dua bahagi-an
young.woman PROG tear.up cloth inside two divide-NMLZ
'A girl is tearing apart a piece of cloth in two pieces.'

These results partly contradict the Aspect Hypothesis, which predicts that progressive markers under incomplete acquisition will be limited mainly to activities, and certainly not extended to accomplishments and achievements. The fact that progressives are overgeneralized rather than underrepresented deserves an explanation. Moreover, the analysis of the sociolinguistic profiles of the speakers show that different types of speakers overgeneralize the progressive, namely both speakers who hardly use the language and speakers who use the language frequently (including first generation speakers). This too begs for an explanation.

We explore the hypothesis that different possible causes underly the overuse of the progressive in these two groups and we suggest methods of disentangling these different motivations for future research. We follow Moro (2016) in the idea that progressive markers might be reanalyzed as present tense markers in the fluent speakers as the result of frequent co-activation of Dutch and the heritage language. We thus suggest that for this group cross-linguistic influence could be seen as a feature of a reassembly process as proposed by Brown & Putnam (2015). Heritage speakers re-assemble functional features of their dominant language (for instance finiteness and tense in Dutch) and map them onto syntactic structures of the heritage language. For the speakers with low exposure to the heritage we suggest that hyperextension could be a word finding and flagging strategy: speakers use the progressive to gain time to select the lexical verb that expresses the intended meaning and as a means to encode Chineseness even in the selected verb form that combines with the progressive is borrowed from English or Dutch.

Apart from identity flagging, lexical retrieval facilitation and functional convergence. Koontz-Garboden (2004) argues that the use of progressives is more frequent in informal registers and since heritage speakers have input only from informal registers their frequent use of progressives could result from their differential exposure pattern (Kupisch & Rothman 2018). It is possible that more generally progressives are used more in informal situations mostly. The observation that immigrant languages are used in informal settings only might stimulate the use of progressives in two ways: use in informal settings only might self-prime speakers to use the progressive more and more and heritage speakers only have access to informal speech which increases their likelihood to use the progressive. The reliance on informal settings might accelerate the rise of the progressive.

References

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