

The language development of heritage children: protracted or different?

Evangelia Daskalaki¹, Vasiliki Chondrogianni², Elma Blom³

¹University of Alberta, ²University of Edinburgh, ³Utrecht University

A recurring question in the literature is whether the language development of children learning their first language in a heritage context goes through the same stages as that of their monolingual peers (only at a slower rate) or whether it follows a different path due to influence from the majority language and other factors characteristic of heritage bilingualism (see Montrul, 2016; Polinsky & Scontras, 2019). The few studies that have addressed this question rely on comparisons between heritage and age-matched monolingual children, but, crucially, lack comparable, quantitative data from younger monolingual children who are in the process of acquiring these structures in the home country (Flores & Barbosa, 2014).

To address this gap, we compared children learning Greek as a heritage language in Canada with both age-matched and younger monolingual learners of Greek. Focusing on subject/object use and using an elicitation task (adapted from Daskalaki, Chondrogianni, Blom, Argyri, & Paradis, 2018) we asked:

- (i) How do Greek heritage children compare *with age-matched Greek monolingual children* in the production (form/placement) of subjects and objects?
- (ii) How do they compare *with younger Greek monolingual children*?

Participants included 25 seven-to-nineteen-year-old heritage Greek children in Canada, 27 seven-to-seventeen-year-old age-matched monolingual children in Greece, and 28 four-to-six-year old young monolingual children in Greece, whose knowledge of the target structures might have not been stabilized yet.

The elicitation task targeted: *subject form* in Topic Continuity contexts (TC), where subjects are preferably null; *object form* in Wide Focus contexts, where objects are preferably realized as clitics (WF), and *subject placement* in embedded interrogatives (EI) and object relatives (OR), where subjects are preverbal.

Fisher exact tests confirmed a significant association between group and type of answer. Heritage children produced a percentage of lexical subjects (12.82%) and lexical objects (28.95%) in the conditions where null subjects or object clitics would be preferred (TC, WF). They also produced a percentage of preverbal subjects in the conditions where postverbal subjects would be grammatical (EI: 34.63% SV; OR: 40.44% SV). In this respect, they differed from both age-matched monolinguals, who performed at ceiling across conditions, and from younger monolinguals, who performed at ceiling in TC and WF, and produced a percentage of null, rather than preverbal subjects, in EI (10.11%: null S) and OR (15.43%: null S). Overall, the results revealed a heritage language developmental path that, at least with respect to the structures under consideration, is distinct in two ways: First, heritage children overuse preverbal subjects, possibly due to cross-linguistic influence from English. Second, heritage children overuse lexical NPs, showing a tendency for overspecification, whereas young monolinguals overuse null subjects, showing a tendency for underspecification (in line with Leclercq & Lenart, 2013).

Sentence Completion Task

(1) Topic Continuity (TC). Experimenter:

a. Jati pije sto furno i kiria Maria?

‘Why did Mrs Maria go to the bakery?’

b. Ksekina tin apandisi su me to epidhi ‘Start your reply with because’

Child (expected answer): epidhi ithele na aghorasi psomi
because wanted.3Sg to buy bread

(2) Wide Focus (WF). Experimenter:

To koritsi lejete Maria. I Maria epeze me mia bala. Ti ejine i bala tis Marias? ‘This is Maria. Maria was playing with a ball. What happened to Marias’ ball?’

Child (expected answer): Tin pire o skilos
It.cl took.3Sg the dog.Nom

(3) Embedded Interrogatives (EI). Experimenter:

a. I egoni mu i Maria mu pe ti forese, alla den thimame tora.

‘My granddaughter Maria, told me what she put on. But I can’t remember now.’

b. Ti den thimate i jiajia? ‘What doesn’t the grandmother remember?’

c. Ksekina tin apadisi su me to *den thimate* ‘Start your reply with *She doesn’t remember*’

Child (expected answer): Den thimate ti forese i Maria
Neg remember.3Sg what put on the Maria.Nom

(4) Object Relatives (OR). Experimenter:

a. Aftos ine o mikros Nikolas ki afti ine i Evi. ‘This is little Nicholas and this is Evi.’

b. Ti mas dhichni o mikros Nikolas? ‘What is little Nicholas showing to us?’

c. ksekina tin apandisi su me ti phrasi *mas dhixni to paghoto pu...* ‘Start your reply with *he is showing to us the ice-cream that...*’

Child (expected answer): Mas dhixni to paghoto pu troi i Evi.
to.us show.3Sg the ice-cream that eat3Sg the Evi