

Resolving optionality in heritage language acquisition? A pilot study on Differential Object Marking in Spanish in contact with German.

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In heritage language (HL) acquisition, the existence of grammatical optionality seems to cause a paradox: on the one hand, under the assumption of incomplete acquisition (e.g., Montrul 2016, Benmamoun et al. 2013a,b), the acquisition of HLs (despite being acquired as native languages) shares similarities with the acquisition of an L2 and, thus, optionality is not a surprising, but rather an expected phenomenon. In fact, as stated by the *Interface Hypothesis* (Sorace 2011), interface phenomena, i.e., grammatical domains that involve interactions between syntactical and other features, regularly lead to optionality in the interlanguages. Consequently, similar thoughts can be assumed for HLs. On the other hand, however, the relevance of the IH is yet unclear (see criticism for L2 in Texeira 2016 and for HLA in Schmitz & Scherger in press), as HL acquisition can also be regarded as complete (native) language acquisition of a contact variety (see Kupisch & Rothman 2018), thus leading to the reduction or even abolition of optionality.

In this talk, we focus on Spanish as HL in Germany where HLs are politically supported (e.g. it is common to attend special tutorials in the afternoon). We present data of an ongoing data collection which supports the second approach, i.e., (complete) HL acquisition as diachronic language change. Based on an experiment on the *Differential Object Marking* (DOM) where several different internal and external interfaces are at play (Torrego 1998) involving both “internal” interfaces (i.e. morphosyntactic properties) and “external” ones (semantic and pragmatic properties), we claim that heritage speakers (HS) behave as a homogeneous group and is, thus, crucially different from L2 speakers living in the same environment.

Although optionality is known to exist both in L1 and L2 development (e.g. Hyams 1996, Sorace 2000, 2005), it differs in nature and in the source of the observed patterns: Regarding the nature of optionality, the question is whether it is real or just apparent, i.e. if there is a consistency in the learner’s system which is not clear at first sight (see Sorace 2000). As for sources, Hyams (1996) mentions particularly underspecification in L1 acquisition which may cause a different type of optionality than e.g. residual optionality caused by a permanent instability in grammatical domains at interfaces of syntax and discourse discussed by Sorace (2005) for L1 attrition and ultimate attainment of near-native L2 speakers.

In Spanish, DOM is said to be optional under the following circumstances (von Heusinger & Kaiser 2005): if the object of a sentence with an agentive subject consists of a human, indefinite, non-specific object, or of an animate (non-human), indefinite, specific object, the object can or cannot be marked with “*a*” with different preferences among native speakers depending on how “agentivity” is interpreted.

By means of an experiment consisting of Acceptability Judgments (14 items plus fillers) and a Completion Test (12 items plus fillers), we investigate the performance of German-Spanish bilingual HS in comparison to other speakers. In order to not falsely equate “nativeness” with monolingualism (see Rothman & Treffers-Daller 2014 for arguments), our study does not only involve a comparison between HS and monolingual speakers of Spanish, but also features another multilingual group: L1 German learners of L2 Spanish.

To avoid any bias in form of favouring one group or another, the experimental items were created using the somewhat “artificial” normative grammar as baseline for the study. As reported in many studies (e.g. Montrul & Bowles 2009; Montrul & Sánchez-Walker 2013; Guijarro Fuentes & Marinis 2011, Guijarro-Fuentes et al. 2017, Nediger et al. 2016), all speaker groups are expected to deviate from this baseline to a certain degree. This methodology helps because we are not interested in the question of whether HS acquire the *same* system as the monolinguals do, but rather aim to find out if the acquired system is *stable as such* (i.e., seen as a language in its own rights). Consequently, analyses are mainly based on the variance values of the different groups that reflect the in-group heterogeneity, and not on a mere comparison of mean values.

First findings of the ongoing study (92 participants so far) show that, interestingly, German-Spanish HS (age rank: 13-56, mean=30.2) generally show less deviations from the norm than English-Spanish HS in the USA known from previous research. Statistical analyses show that, whereas HS and the L2 group differ

significantly in many items, HS and monolinguals do not. The HS' variance values fall steadily between the two comparison groups with a greater approximation toward the monolingual value. Although more data are needed to confirm these results, there is no evidence of "chaotic" variation, i.e., we can show that an optionality suggesting an instability as described above does not appear in the HS perform as a stable group.

In conclusion, although the acquired HL may differ from the monolingual norm in some respects, it turns out to be a stable variety shared by all speakers of the speech community. HS clearly show a much more homogeneous and presumably systematic linguistic behaviour than L2 speakers do, even in interface domains. HL is thus characterized as a shared contact variety, and not as a set of individual interlanguages. These findings also partially explain why the results for HS in Europe diverge from those of the USA, as the respective HS groups acquire different contact varieties.

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