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Auxiliary Selection in Italo-Canadian Heritage Speakers

Although the Italian community in Canada is the fourth biggest ethnic group on the Canadian soil (Danesi 1985), the issue of heritage speakers in the Italo-Canadian context is not prominent in recent studies. The majority of research on the topic investigates the language of the first generation (cf. Clivio 1986, Danesi 1985), leaving the second generation aside. This paper, on the contrary, specifically focusses on the language of a small group of English-Italian heritage speakers born and raised in Canada by two Italian families that migrated in the early 1960s. Data collection took place in April 2019, and consisted of semi-structured interviews among six English-Italian bilinguals. Despite the limited number of informants, their family relationships – i.e., three sisters and three siblings – turn out to be relevant, in terms of quality of the received input. Since the informants were raised together, they were exposed to a similar input, which underwent some changes during the years. The language of the first generation seems to be highly interfered from the point of view of the lexicon, since the interactions with their children are mostly conducted in English. This can explain why the informants show the typical characteristics of heritage speakers, in that they are now dominant in a language that is not their L1 (Benmamoun - Montrul - Polinsky 2013). Despite the differences in the linguistic background of each informant, it is possible to consider all of them as heritage speakers.

In this paper, we will discuss the topic of auxiliary selection in the language of the six informants in order to identify the underlying patterns that regulate their choices.

Before data analysis, it is crucial to provide a brief description of the kind of language that each informant uses. The diversity is mostly due to the extreme complexity of the Italian linguistic situation that arises in migration contexts as well as in Italy. For instance, the language of informant M is dramatically different from the language of informant C or J. This is because M proves to be the only speaker of a form of Italian known as *italiano popolare* ‘popular Italian’, whereas the others are speakers of the regional dialect. This distinction could be explained on the basis of age differences, as in Bettoni (1986), where the highest degree of fluency is found in the eldest sibling; despite the fact that fluency is not the main point in this case, such an age difference could have also affected other linguistic features. Coming back to the auxiliary selection, it is fundamental to underline that the regional dialect spoken by all the informants, i.e. the dialect of Ascoli Piceno (in the Marche region), selects only one auxiliary regardless of the (in)transitivity of the verb. This feature does not correspond to standard Italian, a language that selects different auxiliaries on the basis of the two parameters of transitivity and unaccusativity: *essere* ‘be’ with intransitive and unaccusative verbs and *avere* ‘have’ with transitive and unergative (non-unaccusative) verbs. In the dialect of Ascoli Piceno, only the auxiliary correspondent to ‘be’ is selected. Thus, in a sentence like (1), produced by J, the use of the auxiliary *essere* ‘be’ is grammatical with the verb *lasciare* ‘leave’, a transitive verb, in the active voice.

(1) J: è **lasciatë** la sposa
 be.3.SG leave.PAST.PART def.F bride.F
 [(he) has left the bride]

The use of ‘be’ as the main auxiliary predominates in all the interviews and seems coherent with the rules of the dialect implied. However, in the productions in (2) and (3) the auxiliary is not ‘be’ but ‘have’.

(2) M: quell'ese**mb**ie che loro genetuoro **ha dato** a loro
that example that their parents have.3.SG give.PAST.PART to them
[the example given by their parents]

(3) M: s' è imbarcata a Nuv York. E da lì
REFL be.3.SG sail.PAST.PART.F to New York and from there

ha venuta a...
have.3.SG. come.PAST.PART.F to
[she sailed from New York and hence she came to...]

In (2) the use of the auxiliary 'have' follows the rules of standard Italian, and the past participle does not show agreement in gender. However, the inflected verb *ha* 'has' does not show agreement in number with the plural subject correspondent to 'their parents'. In (3) the situation is slightly different in that *venire* 'come' is an unaccusative verb, and in standard Italian it requires the auxiliary *essere* 'be' and not *avere* 'have'. Surprisingly, there is also agreement in gender with the past participle.

The issue of auxiliary selection, together with past participle gender agreement, will be further discussed in the paper. The majority of the information will be retrieved from the corpus of interviews among the six abovementioned speakers. Data analysis will eventually lead to a deeper understanding of the major patterns behind auxiliary selection, which can be explained also in terms of language contact and situational variation.

References

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