

Grammatical gender in Heritage Russian across five countries: External factors, sensitivity to cues and cross-linguistic influence

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Grammatical gender in Russian displays a three-way distinction (masculine-feminine-neuter). Most nouns exhibit transparent gender cues, but certain noun classes are opaque/ambiguous. While gender on nouns with transparent cues is generally acquired early by monolingual children, certain delays have been attested with ambiguous cues. Previous research findings on heritage speakers differ with respect to the kind of non-target production found: restructuring to a two-gender system (masculine-feminine, Polinsky 2008) or defaulting to masculine (Rodina & Westergaard 2017). Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent bilingual children are sensitive to gender cues or whether certain agreement patterns are simply memorized. To investigate this, our studies have elicited gender agreement with both existing and nonce words and both transparent and ambiguous gender cues.

We compare data from five different studies on the acquisition of grammatical gender in Heritage Russian, investigating children in Germany, Israel, Norway, Latvia and the UK. The children grow up in diverse heritage language backgrounds, ranging from small groups (in Norway) to large communities (in Latvia). Furthermore, the children also vary with respect to family background (one or two Russian-speaking parents) as well as the intensity of instruction in the heritage language. The majority languages that these children speak differ widely with respect to the linguistic property studied: While English has no grammatical gender, Latvian and Hebrew both have two-gender systems (feminine and masculine), while German and (to some extent) Norwegian have three-gender systems, with a feminine-masculine-neuter distinction, like Russian. However, the transparency of gender assignment varies greatly, with Hebrew and Latvian having very predictable gender cues, while gender assignment in Norwegian is generally arbitrary and German constitutes a gender system that is only semi-transparent. We focus on both language-internal and language-external factors that may be (non-)facilitative for the acquisition of gender in Russian, i.e. on possible cross-linguistic influence from the majority language and the importance of the various background factors. We also take a closer look at the German-Russian study and consider some individual profiles and possible cross-linguistic influence from the heritage language to the majority language.