

What is heritage syntax? Cross-community evidence

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In this talk I will consider “heritage language syntax” from a comparative, cross-community perspective, taking into account not only the structural properties of heritage languages, but also their historical and social settings (Aalberse, Backus & Muysken, 2019). One characteristic of heritage speakers is that in everyday life they may use their heritage and dominant languages together (*code-switching*) or keep them apart, as is also true of non-heritage bilinguals (Deuchar, 2012; López, 2020). By focusing on situations in which the heritage language and the dominant language are used within the same sentence (*code-switched speech*), and comparing them to situations when heritage speakers use only their heritage language or only their dominant language (*unilingual speech*), I will consider the role of the input (Gathercole 2008; Gathercole & Thomas, 2009; Unsworth, 2013; Kupisch & Rothman, 2018; Domínguez, Hicks & Slabakova, 2019) in determining the degree of match between the developing bilinguals’ productions and judgments with the forms in the input provided by the community. To this end, I will focus on the nominal and verbal domains in communities that differ in geographical setting, history, social status of the languages and extent of migration. I will show how social factors such as social networks, specific cultural norms that have developed over the lifetime of a community, or language prestige may impinge on linguistic structures (see also Blokzijl, Deuchar & Parafita Couto, 2017; Delgado, 2018; Balam, Parafita Couto & Stadthagen-González, in press). Combining and evaluating these results will give insight into how communities develop conventions and norms to which speakers try to converge (Aboh, 2015). I will motivate the need to more accurately describe the multilingual setting of the heritage language, as any other bilingual language situation, if we want to arrive at a theory that is both descriptively and explanatorily adequate. I will conclude with a cautionary note about making gross claims about the structure of heritage language varieties (e.g. “heritage Spanish”, see Toribio & Bullock, 2016). Instead, the focus should be on how intricately linguistic and extra-linguistic factors interact in shaping bilinguals’ linguistic competence (see also Walkden & Breibarth, 2019).

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