

Separating universal principles from attrition and transfer in heritage language

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This paper examines several areas of vulnerability, the direction of change and its correlation to other linguistic and social factors in Heritage Polish. Heritage languages (HLs) in general are a promising testbed for investigating language change. The HL context involves two concurrent linguistic systems that influence each other, with the ambient language of the larger community being dominant for the heritage speaker. Given such a context, one may expect strong linguistic transfer of structures from the dominant language to the HL and/or that attrition in the HL (e.g. simplifying the case marking paradigm). However, I argue that HL changes are more complex and cannot be explained solely by either transfer or attrition, thus indicating that more general, universal principles of language structure play the crucial role. The core conclusion then is that languages under contact undergo a systematic reorganization of structure, rather than convergence to other languages or analogical processes related to use.

PARTICIPANTS

The data comes from a group of nine Heritage Polish speakers residing in Toronto, Canada. There are two distinct categories of speakers – 1st generation (HER1), i.e., these who were born and raised in Poland and immigrated to Canada as adults at least 20 years ago, and 2nd generation (HER2), i.e., children of 1st generation: those who acquired Polish at home but grew up and still live in Toronto. Crucially, HER1, rather than the standard language, constitutes input for the acquisition of Polish by HER2. The data is contrasted with the control group of monolingual Homeland Polish (HOM) speakers who never immigrated. The resulting three-way comparison is rare in HL studies; I argue that excluding HER1 may lead to a number of missed generalizations.

METHODOLOGY

The investigation is a part of a larger project Heritage Language Variation and Change ([1]). The data is obtained through a series of sociolinguistic interviews, i.e. the variables are spontaneously produced by speakers who volunteered to participate in the study. Depending on the frequency of the investigated variables, the number of tokens for each speaker ranged from 100-150 per variable. Each dependent variable was further coded for the expected linguistic predictors since the structure of interest was usually largely uniform across the generations but the significance of such predictors might have changed. The advantage of the methodology used here is that it allows us to avoid the ‘yes’-bias frequent in speakers that for social reason may lack confidence in judging the acceptability of structures ([2]).

VARIABLES & RESULTS

The first morphosyntactic variable, NULL SUBJECT, is analyzed by Chocieł [3]. She shows that in HOM Polish 20% of all pronominal subjects are overt - most often when the referent of the current subject does not meet the referent of the preceding one, with 3 sg. subject and with feminine past tense markers. Since English has a nearly categorical overt subject pronoun, it is expected that due to language transfer, the overt subject pronouns will be produced in more environments. On the other hand, she hypothesizes that if the change is due to attrition, speakers should opt for the more unmarked structure, i.e. more null pronouns. The results show that, indeed, heritage speakers increase the rate of overt pronouns but Chocieł argues that they do not replicate English pattern because of the decreased significance of the subject continuity predictor.

The second morphosyntactic variable, CASE MARKING, was analyzed according to the (mis)match of the prescribed case (as found in standard Polish) and the produced case. The

prescribed case depends on declension type, syntactic structure and lexical idiosyncrasy and these were coded to determine the direction of change. Since English lacks the complexity in nouns but retains some marking in pronouns, this factor was analyzed as well. The results show an overall low rate of mismatch with two main strategies utilized by the speakers – 1. cross-paradigm flattening to default nominative (nominals in all environments get NOM marking); 2. generalizing accusative to all direct objects including these with intentional verbs traditionally calling for genitive ('I'm searching for a Polish woman.' -> *Szukam Polk-ę* (ACC) ~ *Szukam Polk-i* (GEN)). Finally, indeed the prescribed case marking occurs more often on pronouns rather full nouns confirming a cross-linguistic pattern of diachronic change in case marking.

The first phonological variable, WORD-FINAL OBSTRUENT DEVOICING, is a hallmark of Polish "accent". Obstruents neutralize word-finally when followed by a pause or another voiceless obstruent ([4]). Although English is not described as having a phonological devoicing rule, some have argued that some degree of phonetic neutralization persists ([5]). The results show that the rate of devoicing is not categorical even for HOM speakers who occasionally produce the underlying form. HER1 has a similar degree of devoicing which also follows the same rules as HOM. However, for HER2 the rate of devoicing is higher than in any there group, HOM, HER1 or monolingual English. Furthermore, the rules governing the devoicing seem to be perfect conjunction of the grammars in the two languages. Thus, this constitutes a unique type of transfer than does not result in the competition of grammars but their convergence.

The other phonological variable examined here, REALIZATION OF NASAL DIPHTHONG CATEGORY, depends on the following context - nasal diphthongs [ɛ̃w], [ɔ̃w] surface before fricatives and word-finally or a sequence of an oral vowel+nasal [ɛn], [ɔm] appears before stops ([4]). Since English does not have these exact phonemes, heritage speakers may opt to flatten the paradigm and realize all of them as a sequence or as a plain oral monophthong thus neutralizing the categories. Both strategies are observed.

CORRELATIONS WITH LINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL FACTORS

The variety of Polish spoken by HER1 shows changes from HOM, indicating that incipient change in HER1 feeds further changes in HER2. For some variables the change is gradual – each generation produces more of a given variant (HOM<HER1<HER2 in accusative-genitive mismatch) and the grammaticalization progressively extends to new contexts. It seems to be a fast-forward change instigated already in the HOM variety. However, for other variables the change appears rapidly between the HER1 and HER2 (e.g., in nominative default marking). This provides a unique insight into a direction of change as a result of simultaneous bilingual acquisition rather than exposure to English or current use of Polish.

The difficulty of correlating the degree of change in an individual with the non-linguistic factors such as self-reported language use and rate of code-switching suggests that language transfer itself is not a sole explanation for a change in any of the variables. Neither is attrition – the individual degree of change for one variable does not predict the degree of change for others.

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