

What About the Input? Another Reason Why Heritage Competence Differs So

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The fact that heritage language grammars are often different from monolingual norms to various degrees and in various domains (e.g., Montrul 2002, 2004, 2007; Polinsky 1997, 2007; Polinsky and Kagan 2007; Silva-Corvalán 1994)) is not only well-established, but it is not surprising given the linguistic context of their acquisition. Non-pathological attrition—the erosion of previously acquired linguistic properties—is often cited as the likely cause of these differences. Montrul (2004) offers another explanation that sidesteps the attrition problem: second generation children acquire English, but fail to acquire Spanish completely. Without longitudinal data, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate *a posteriori* between attrition and incomplete acquisition since they both have similar consequences for heritage language competence. Moreover, both attrition and incomplete acquisition make explicit and implicit assumptions about the type of input to which heritage speakers are exposed. That is, properties can only be attrited and/or not completely acquired if they are exemplified in the primary linguistic data of heritage speakers. If they are not, then logic dictates that heritage speakers, unlike monolinguals whose input has these properties, would have no recourse to acquire them. This fact makes it extremely important to couple experimental research with quantitative and qualitative measures of the input available to heritage speakers. In the context of Spanish in the United States, this means that a documentation of North-American dialects of Spanish must be done for the properties we investigate in heritage speakers. For example, the fact that heritage speakers of Spanish fail to recognize semantic nuances related to optional (interfaced conditioned) uses of the subjunctive (i.e., where there is alternation of the indicative/subjunctive), yet have clear knowledge of subjunctive morphology and use when it is strictly subcategorized by the verbal predicate (as in volitional contexts) could reflect either incomplete acquisition as Montrul (2007) suggests, attrition at interfaces or it could just be complete acquisition of a particular-type of Spanish that has undergone attrition at the macro-level (i.e., a North-American dialect that no longer encodes such a distinction). Following this line of reasoning, Rothman (2007) proposed that heritage speakers are an untapped source for investigating proposals of dialectal variation and language change. Rothman demonstrated that Brazilian Portuguese (BP) heritage speakers do not acquire inflected infinitives, unlike monolingual BP adults and advanced adult L2 learners (Pires 2006, Quicoli 1996; Rothman and Iverson 2007) which corroborated the proposal that only the standard dialect of BP (no one's native language) conserves inflected infinitives (unlike European Portuguese dialects, which always conserve them) (see Pires 2002). These findings have now been shown to match related predictions for monolingual BP children who do not acquire the syntax and semantics of inflected infinitives until around 11 (Pires and Rothman, in preparation).

The present talk will present a project that is currently in the first stages of implementation with colleagues Marcela Cazzoli-Goeta and Martha Young-Scholten. This project aims to document the syntax of Spanish diasporic dialects in the US and the UK, which we believe is an integral first step towards differentiating between attrition, incomplete acquisition and input variables as a source of heritage language differences. Traditionally, studies that investigate contact between speakers of a non-hegemonic minority ('heritage') language with speakers of a majority language are generally undertaken either under the label of theoretical linguistics or sociolinguistics. Here, research methodology is dictated by working assumptions: language acquisition and attrition occur at the level of the individual (in the mind) while language variation occurs at the level of the speech community (in space). We argue that such an endeavor is best done when the researcher adopts perspectives from both of these traditionally non-intersecting sub-fields of linguistics, thereby taking full advantage of the opportunity to observe language change firsthand. Such a methodology, which I will detail, further demonstrates how studying heritage languages and their acquisition informs linguistic theories, specifically diachronic linguistic proposals.