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Age of onset effects in the acquisition of null arguments in Polish and German as heritage languages

In heritage language research there is a debate whether heritage speakers who acquired both of their languages simultaneously differ with regard to their attainment in the heritage language from heritage speakers who acquired heritage and majority language sequentially in early childhood. Montrul (2008: 60) explicitly states that „[i]f language attrition occurs within early (pre-puberty) bilingualism, it will be more severe in simultaneous bilinguals (exposed to the two languages very early) than in sequential bilinguals (when the L1 was acquired before the L2)“. Thus, attainment in the heritage language should be better with sequential than simultaneous bilinguals. A possible explanation for this claim has to do with the quantity of input heritage speaker receive in their home language. If both languages are acquired simultaneously, input is split up between the two languages from birth, thus leaving less space for the heritage language to develop before critical periods in language acquisition have come to a close. However, Kupisch (2013: 210) reacts to this claim by pointing to numerous studies on simultaneous bilinguals which show that they can successfully acquire linguistic properties in both of their languages, even if these properties differ.

In our paper we address this possible divide between the two types of heritage speakers by looking at data on the acquisition of null arguments in two heritage languages: German as a heritage language in Poland, and Polish as a heritage language in Germany. Both languages differ with regard to the property under investigation: Polish allows null subjects and objects to some extent (Pilarski 2013). Monolingual Polish children show a general preference for null arguments at an early age, but with increasing age they reach an adult-like level of omission (Świącicka 1993, Tryzna 2009). German, on the contrary, is a non-null subject and object language (Hong 1995). It allows omission of arguments only in topic positions. Monolingual German children, however, omit to some extent arguments in various positions (Jakubowicz et al. 1997). Once finite verbs are used productively, subject-drop decreases (Clahsen & Penke 1992).

As numerous studies have shown, null arguments can be considered a vulnerable domain in bilingual acquisition. The problems that bilinguals have when acquiring null subject (NSL) and null object (NOL) languages are mostly accounted for by the Interface Hypothesis (cf. Sorace et al. 2009): Thus, the choice between null and overt arguments requires the integration of syntactic and discourse-pragmatic knowledge which leads to processing problems in bilinguals. Studies on different NSLs revealed a tendency of bilinguals to overuse overt subject pronouns (Polinsky 1995). However, increased use of overt subjects has been found to occur mainly in young children (Schmitz et al. 2012), but not in older or adult heritage speakers of NSLs (Nagy 2015).

For our own research, we pursue the following research questions: (i) Is the representation and use of null arguments in early successive Polish and German heritage speakers similar to age-matched monolinguals of Polish and German, on the one hand, and/or is it similar to simultaneous bilingual heritage speakers of Polish/German, on the other? (ii) Can possible differences between heritage and monolingual speakers be accounted for in terms of cross-linguistic influence (e.g. overuse or prolonged use of argument omission in German heritage speakers growing up in Poland and/or overuse of overt subject pronouns in Polish heritage speakers in Germany)? Our main focus will be on attainment with regard to the investigated property at later stages of the acquisition of Polish and German as heritage languages.

Therefore, the study design includes the following groups which differ in age of onset of the acquisition of the respective majority language (n=10 for each group and heritage language, overall 80 children): (i) heritage speakers of Polish and German who acquired Polish and German simultaneously from birth, (ii) heritage speakers of Polish and German who started to acquire the majority language at age 3-4, (iii) heritage speakers of Polish and German who started to acquire the majority language at age 6-7, (iv) a control group of age-matched German and Polish monolingual children. Each child has been exposed to the majority language for 5 years, i.e. the age span of the investigated children ranges from 5 (simultaneous bilinguals) to 12 years (sequential bilinguals with age of onset of the majority language at 6-7 years). Simultaneous bilinguals and monolingual controls are divided into three age groups (5 year-olds, 8-9 year-olds and 11-12 year-olds) in order to allow for exposure-matched and age-matched comparisons.

Data were gathered in 2017 and 2018 using different experimental tasks: (i) a sentence repetition task, (ii) a forced choice task, (iii) an acceptability judgment task, (iv) a picture matching task and (v) an elicited narration based on a set of pictures (MAIN instrument, cf. Gagarina et al. 2012). We are still in the process of coding and analyzing the data, but a preliminary analysis of the data coded so far revealed no significant differences between the two groups of heritage speakers (i.e. simultaneous vs. early successive bilinguals) for each heritage language regarding the use of null/overt arguments. Thus, it seems to be the case that our results do not confirm the findings of Montrul (2008) for Spanish heritage speakers in the U.S. However, there seems to be an age effect with older heritage speakers performing more like the monolingual controls, which would be in line with similar findings on null subject use of heritage speakers of Romance languages in Germany (cf. Schmitz et al. 2012). These findings, however, will have to be verified after including all examined children in the analysis.

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