

Abstract

Number and gender mismatches in Italian and Spanish heritage speakers in Germany

Heritage speakers are generally defined as bilinguals living in a social and familial setting speaking the minority language of their parents which differs from that of the majority language (Valdés 2000, 2005). There is vivid discussion of whether the heritage language spoken by heritage speakers and their children is affected by *language loss/attrition* (first generation migrants, L1 Romance/L2 German speakers) or *incomplete acquisition* (second and further generation migrants, HS), as claimed by e.g. Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky (2013a, b), or whether a gradual process of language change is at play (see e.g., Rothman 2009). Usually, the comparison involves monolingual control groups, taking their production as “baseline”. More recently, Pascual y Cabo and Rothman (2012) and Rothman and Treffers-Daller (2014) criticized this procedure and Pires (2011) required to investigate heritage languages as proper systems. For the domain of gender in heritage Spanish in the US, Alarcón (2011) observed complete acquisition of gender. The latter finding is supported, among others, by Montrul, Foote and Perpiñán (2008) and Montrul, Davidson, de la Fuente and Foote (2014) who compared Spanish HS with L2 learners and stated a clear advantage of the HS as well as native-like processing of gender by the HS. There seem to be neither studies on gender in Italian HS in the US nor studies on number in Italian and Spanish HS in the US yet.

Interesting questions for research are: a) the role of the language combination (Romance two gender systems in combination with English, a system without gender, or German, a three gender language) and b) possible differences between gender and number features in heritage languages. In order to contribute to this research, the present talk therefore investigates gender and number marking by Spanish and Italian HS raised in Germany. The involved Romance heritage languages Italian and Spanish mainly differ from German with regard to gender marking on postnominal attributive adjectives which is excluded in German. Furthermore, Italian differs from Spanish and German in having past participle agreement. In all three languages, subjects and verbs have to agree in number at the sentence level and determiners, nouns and adjectives have to do so at the DP level. Errors in gender and number agreement lead to ungrammatical utterances. This does not necessarily imply, however, that agreement errors have to be taken as evidence for language attrition/incomplete acquisition. So far, research on gender in Italian and Spanish HS in Germany shows very low error rates: For instance, Weidner (2014) compared 13 Spanish HS grown up in Germany with a simultaneously bilingual child (2L1 acquisition) and observed very low rates of gender errors in the DPs produced by the HS (3%) and the bilingual child (2%) which indicates that both types of early bilingualism (at preschool age) lead to a native level of gender marking. Stöhr, Akpınar, Bianchi and Kupisch (2012) investigated grammatical gender in Italian HS in Germany and compared them with Italian learners of L2 German. Both groups showed errors rather in gender assignment while errors of agreement were rare. The authors claim native-like attainment to be possible in Italian heritage language acquisition under the condition that early age of onset combines with sufficient input.

In our talk, we attempt to provide a (preliminary) answer to the following research questions:

- ➔ Which factors may cause language attrition/incomplete acquisition of gender and number? Both intra- and extra-linguistic factors may be relevant, for instance transfer/CLI (due to bilingualism), proficiency and/or fluency, age of the individual speakers.
- ➔ Do we find differences between gender and number agreement in heritage Italian and heritage Spanish?

To this end, we will present results from an investigation of both Italian (n=16) and Spanish heritage speakers (n=13) and a monolingual control group of each language (Italian n=10, Spanish n=7). We will present the individual results of both monolingual and bilingual speakers from semi-structured interviews in order to interpret carefully the production of both DPs and whole sentences (regarding subject-verb agreement) of the HS with respect to the influencing factors.

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