Heritage Languages in Toronto: A New Project

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Given that over half of the world's population is multilingual from childhood (Tucker 1999), it's strange that in the field of variationist sociolinguistics, the trend is decidedly to examine one language at a time, essentially treating speakers as monolingual. Even in Toronto, touted as the "most multilingual city in the world", two major projects examining ethnic effects on language focus exclusively on English (Tagliamonte 2007, Walker & Hoffman 2008). The Heritage Language Variation and Change Project (HLVC), currently in its initial stage of recruiting fieldworkers and speakers, complements these English projects by examining variation and change in several heritage languages spoken in the same communities (beginning with Faetar, Italian, Korean and Russian). To fully understand how language is used to construct identity, and its variation in a multilingual metropolis, it is essential to examine speakers' full repertoires, and not treat them as monolingual entities. With the addition of a corpus of naturally-occurring speech in these lesser-studied languages, analysis of the full repertoire of bilingual speakers will be possible.

An "added bonus" of this project is that it will revisit Faetar, an endangered Francoprovençal variety spoken by about 700 people in two tiny mountaintop villages in southern Italy (Apulia), by interviewing as many Faetar-speakers in the GTA as possible.

At the workshop, we will be interested in discussing methods of making initial contact in ethnic enclave communities, exploring questions of how best to select speakers and fieldworkers, and how to ensure natural-sounding sociolinguistic interviews both when the participants don't know each other at all and when they know each other "too well" to answer typical types of personal background questions.

The role of socio-psychological factors in heritage language transmission

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By providing an overview of the current linguistic situation of the Swiss Mennonite community in the Waterloo Region, Ontario, I will show how speakers' motivations and beliefs have led to different developments in various groups in terms of language behavior.

Traditionally, all Swiss Mennonites in Ontario used Pennsylvania German (PG), as a means of communication in their homes and churches, and English for the purpose of communicating with the non-German population of the area. A change in language behavior, however, was brought about by several schisms within the Canadian Mennonite church. Today, there are several distinct Swiss Mennonite groups in the Waterloo Region. These groups can be divided into three categories: conservative, moderate, and progressive. In groups that showed signs of intergenerational dislocation, I investigated the factors that led to a change in the social process of heritage language transmission. I will present data from interviews that suggest that members who have shifted or lost their heritage language attribute the change as much to social factors (modernization, urbanization, exogamy) as to socio-psychological ones (language attitudes, religious beliefs, identity).

In the context of the groups that maintain PG, I will discuss whether the single domain 'religion' can adequately account for successful transmission of the heritage language, and whether the survival of PG in this area can be explained by Louden's (2003) 'maintenance by inertia hypothesis.' In this way, the presentation discusses how exploring the socio-psychological factors involved in linguistic transmission is as important for the study of heritage languages as is the investigation of the "classical" factors (status, demographic, institutional support) that have been found to influence language maintenance and shift among heritage speakers.

Comprehension of tense and aspect in heritage Labrador Inuttitut receptive bilinguals

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At the low end of heritage language proficiency, there exist a population known as receptive bilinguals (RBs): people who understand their heritage language, but do not speak it. While many of them have good comprehension abilities, they do not understand everything. This study tested RBs' comprehension of Labrador Inuttitut tense and aspect morphemes in English-Heritage Inuttitut receptive bilinguals. No difference between RBs and fluent speakers was found in comprehension of aspectual morphemes and lexical aspect. This finding is surprising, given that studies on languages with other aspectual systems showed that aspect is vulnerable in heritage language (Montrul 2002 for Spanish, Polinsky 2008 for Russian).

Tense in Inuttitut has two dimensions: time and remoteness. The difference between RBs'and fluent speakers' performance on past and future contrast was smaller than the difference in performance on remoteness distinctions. At least for some RBs, remoteness distinctions in tense are not present in their grammar. Two possible explanations are considered: convergence (English has time contrast too, but no remoteness contrast) and universal grammar (time contrasts are more universal than remoteness).

References

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COFFEE BREAK

The alternation of consonant-final nouns in heritage Korean in GTA

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Background: In Korean, due to a number of coda neutralization rules, the underlying segmental contrast is often neutralized in an unsuffixed form of a noun. The most drastic case is found in coronal obstruent-final nouns which all neutralized to [t] in word-final position. So, /nas/ 'sickle', /nac/ 'day', and /nach/ 'face' are all realized as [nat]. The quality of the underlying consonant can only be revealed when the noun is heard with a vowel-initial suffix, such as the locative suffix /e/; [nas-e], [nac-e], and [nach-e]. Due to frequent omission of case markers, however, Korean nouns frequently occur unsuffixed and this poses a potential challenge for the children acquiring Korean. What if a child hears a noun [nat] in the learning data but hasn't yet encountered any form of that noun with a vowel initial suffix? How would the child use the same noun in a locative form? [nat-e], [nat^h-e], [nat*-e], [nac-e], [nac^h-e], [nac*-e], [nas-e], or [nas*-e]? One possibility that presents itself immediately is to avoid alternation (cf. Lexicon Optimization, Prince and Smolensky 1993); i.e., given the isolation form [nat], the simplest choice one can make is [nat-e]. As it turns out, the learners seem to be a fairly sophisticated statistical thinkers and the historical trends and the synchronic variation suggest that learners don't necessarily prefer "no alternation" option but rather opt for the statistically most likely choice i.e., the final consonant that is most frequently represented in the existing lexicon, which is /s/ in the case of coronal obstruent-final nouns. In other words, in Contemporary Korean, nouns that end in a coronal obstruent allow a range of final consonants as variants, /s/-final variants being the most prominent. Similar neutralization and variation occurs with obstruents in other places of articulation but to a lesser degree.

Question: The central question of our study is how heritage learners of Korean would handle such challenges? Heritage speakers do not have the same amount of exposure to the learning data and they likely do not have the same level of statistical knowledge about the Korean lexicon. In such situation, would they revert to the "no alternation" option, which is argued to be the innate default preference (Tessier 2005) or would they opt for a random guessing strategy?

Data collection: In our study, we presented nouns in isolation and prompted the subjects to use them two frame sentences, one with a subject marker (/i/) and another with a topic marker (/ɨn/). We chose 85 consonant-final nouns representing the entire range of noun-final consonants in Korean, resulting in 170 (85 nouns * 2 suffixes) stimuli. 11 subjects were recruited (7 males and 4 females) but one of the subjects had difficulty performing the sentence completion task and was excluded from our analysis. The subjects were also asked to translation 74 Korean words of different frequency ranges (19 low freq., 38 mid freq., 19 high freq.) as a measure of their lexical knowledge and fluency in Korean. The subjects also filled out a questionnaire about their language background, their level of Korean usage and self assessment of their Korean language competence.

Result: The inflected nouns were coded into three categories with respect to the final consonant; (1) etymologically correct, (2) etymologically incorrect but acceptable variant in homeland Korean, (3) incorrect. Using the most liberal criterion, 8 of the 10 subjects showed a (close-to) native-like performance in their inflection of coronal obstruent final nouns (87% correct or higher). 2 other subjects did poorly (13% and 0% correct respectively). The examination of their errors shows that one subject consistently used [t]-final variant exhibiting the "no alternation" option and the other subject was opting for a random guessing strategy. Not surprisingly, these two speakers scored poorly in the vocabulary test and also they made a substantial number of suffix errors (i.e., wrong suffix, doubling of suffix etc.). Further details regarding the correlation between various measure of fluency and the response pattern in the 10 subjects will be discussed.

How transfer happens in narrow syntax: A study of clitic placement in two groups of Spanish-speaking children in Toronto

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Accounts of the selective nature of grammatical transfer have recently focused on the phenomena of semantic and pragmatic shifts in the existing inventory of syntactic structures. Some extreme views hold that syntactic transfer is limited to interpretable features, or to phenomena involving complex interfaces between syntax, and the semantic-pragmatic, or the morphological modules. The present study examines transfer in the case of the variable word order in the clitic climbing constructions, for which there is no semantic correlate (i.e., the reconstruction contexts discussed in Aissen & Perlmutter 1976; Rizzi 1978; Cinque 2004). In Spanish, the pronominal complement of a nonfinite verb optionally merges with the matrix verb, or appears cliticized to a higher verb, in what is known as the clitic climbing construction.

(1) [CP Pedro [VP quiere] [CP escribirla]].
     Pedro wants write-INF-it   'Pedro wants to write it.'

(2) [CP Pedro [VP la quiere escribir]].
     Pedro it wants write-INF   'Pedro wants to write it.'

23 children learning Spanish in a heritage setting participated in an elicited imitation study. Unlike monolinguals (Eisenchlas 2003), whose characteristic error is to reposition pronouns to preverbal (proclisis) position, bilingual children have substantial rates of post-position and omission errors for preverbal clitics. They still produced proclisis errors, but their rate was decreased with English dominance, showing that exposure to English leads to a word order shift in young bilinguals. We follow Masullo (2004), where clitic linearization within a clause itself is a PF phenomena, not a syntactic phenomena, but the configurational properties resulting from order of merge determine the syntactic domain the clitic is merged, whether the lower, non-finite clause, or the finite verbal complex. We argue, following minimalist assumptions, that all forms of syntactic transfer are based in the lexicon, and take the form of either functional convergence (Sánchez 2002), or syntactic priming (Meijer & Fox-Tree 2003).

Heritage Language Speakers of Korean and Coordinate Conjunctions

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Unlike the English coordinate conjunction *and*, which is used for nominal conjunctions and clausal conjunctions alike, Korean has four different conjunctions meaning 'and' which differ in formality (i.e., according to the register required) and the type of constituents they conjoin. *-Lang/ilang*, *-Hako*, and *-wa/kwa* attach to the first conjunct and all conjoin nouns; *-lang/ilang* is the most informal and is used most commonly in speech and *-wa/kwa* is the most formal and is most commonly used in writing. *Kuliko* is a clausal conjunction meaning 'also'. The nominal coordinate conjunctions are not interchangeable with the clausal conjunction *kuliko* and although *-hako* can be used interchangeably with either *-lang/ilang* or *-wa/kwa*, the latter two conjunctions are not interchangeable with one another. The present study examines the usage of Korean conjunctions by adult heritage language speakers who are also simultaneous bilinguals – speakers who were exposed to both Korean and English from birth. The results of an oral elicited production task reveal several areas of difficulty with respect to the proper selection and use of conjunctions in Korean, indicating varying degrees of transfer from English.

LUNCH

American Sign Language and Early Literacy:
Research as Praxis

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This presentation reports findings from an ethnographic action research study of Deaf and hearing parents and infants participating in a family American Sign Language (ASL) literacy program in Ontario. The study documents the context for parents and children's learning of ASL in an environment where resources for supporting early ASL literacy have been scarce. Additionally, at the time of the study restrictions were placed on young Deaf and hard of hearing children's learning of ASL, as the government's Infant Hearing Program frequently did not provide ASL services to children who received cochlear implants or auditory-verbal therapy (Snoddon 2008). Through semi-structured interviews and observations of 6 individual families or parent-child dyads, the study documents participants' encounters with gatekeepers who regulate Deaf children and their families' access to ASL. At the same time, the setting of the ASL Parent-Child Mother Goose Program is presented as a Deaf cultural space and thereby a counter-Discourse (Gee 2008) to medical Discourses regarding Deaf identity and bilingualism. This space features the Deaf mother participants' ASL literacy and numeracy practices and improvisations of ASL rhymes and stories to enhance their suitability for young children. The practices of the ASL Parent-Child Mother Goose Program leader also serve to define and support emerging ASL literacy. In addition, a Deaf cultural space inside a broader context of public services to young Deaf children provides a means for the hearing mother participants to facilitate critical inquiry of issues surrounding bilingualism, ASL, and a Deaf identity.

References

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Aboriginal Languages – Heritage Languages?

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It can be argued that aboriginal languages in many communities across the U.S. and Canada have much in common with Heritage Languages, which in North America are generally understood as non-English or non-English/non-French languages of immigrant families. Obviously, the main difference is that there is no external motherland for Aboriginal languages to draw strength from and with which to make comparisons. Nevertheless there are many issues in common between efforts surrounding the language revitalization of Aboriginal languages and Heritage languages. These involve language attitudes and transmission, specialized needs in language pedagogy and community and financial support. In this paper, I will address these similarities and differences.

COFFEE BREAK

Can the Heritage Student Speak? Linguistic and Cultural Competency in the Grip of Academic Culture

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I would like to think through the larger inquiries into post-secondary language teaching and the recommendations for curricular reforms set out by the Modern Language Association's Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages with a specific case study of the less commonly taught language Hindi-Urdu. At York University, Hindi-Urdu is taught primarily, but not exclusively to heritage learners at three levels. In building a relatively new program, I have faced several challenges that seem to be located at the intersection of transcultural, translingual and more traditional approaches to language teaching. While I completely agree that language learning should not be considered solely an instrumental task preparing students for upper level literature and culture courses as well as the graduate field experience or archival work, I would like to discuss the practical side of an "intellectually and culturally informed" language pedagogy and its ramifications for language assessment.

As the title to my paper indicates, students may not be willing to think through language in a formal linguistic way, but rather rely on their intuition. This may lead to conflicting expectations between students and instructor. Is there a middle-on-the-road path that prepares students to use language outside the classroom without neglecting the mastery of grammatical concepts? I would like to share how I sensitize students for developing a participatory attitude that acknowledges cultural aspects of grammar and that subsequently enables students to understand language along with its grammar as cultural concepts per se and not merely as a tool to talk about culture. I would like to feed into discussions about teaching language through meaningful and content-focused materials rather than through grammar drills only. Yet, I also argue that the prerequisite for communication of culturally informed content is the mastery of culturally specific grammatical concepts and I will give specific examples from the classroom.

The Status of Heritage Languages in the EU

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A recent EuroStat (2007) report showed an increase to the European Union (EU-27) population by 2.4 million; a growth largely due to migration (Lanzieri, 2008). I will examine this influx of international migrants in the EU within the framework of linguistic human rights (Phillipson, Rannut & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995) in order to compare the substantive rights of European languages (official and regional-minority languages) to non European migrant languages. For the purpose of drawing this comparison the paper analyzes recent (2005 – 2008) EU language policy documents related to multilingualism and access to language learning. The EU has a strong organizational network (such as European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages and the Mercator Network) for regional-minority Languages. However, the measures in place for the support of heritage languages are insufficient. After being ignored for many years in the documents of the EU language planning, there has been a tactical change towards the treatment of these non-indigenous minority languages in the recent past. In order to promote multilingualism, the EU has mentioned the existence of non-European languages in their documents. However, as I show in this paper, this is a token acknowledgement of their presence in the EU and rather a public strategic move by the EU to represent its rich 'linguistic diversity'. This paper will conclude by discussing mother-tongue learning opportunities in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany as an example of good educational practice for the support and maintenance of migrant languages and multilingualism in Europe.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION