

Polish Pro-Drop: English influence on heritage Polish in Toronto

With almost half of its 5 million residents reporting a non-official mother tongue (Statcan 2006), Toronto is a highly multilingual city that presents many opportunities for comparative work in the field of contact linguistics. The present paper examines the effects of language contact by determining the extent to which the majority language can affect the grammar of a minority language (Heine & Kuteva 2005). The focus is on the influence of English on the 80,000 Toronto residents who report speaking Polish at home.

The present study is an investigation of pro-drop in a sample of heritage Polish speakers in Toronto, and follows comparable studies on Russian (Hollett 2010) and Italian, Faetar, Korean, and Cantonese (LIN1152). Many languages distinguish themselves from English in having pro-drop as a feature of their grammar. However, there is a prevalence of subject ellipsis in Polish, with Polish speakers employing it in far more contexts than even the related Russian (McShane 2009). With pro-drop as a variable, this sociolinguistic study examines both the overall rate of null versus overt pronouns, as well as the linguistic and social factors affecting their use.

Participants were selected through social networking and interviewed by a native speaker about their cultural background and family history, following the methods of the HLVC (website). Participants were distributed based on age, gender, and immigrant generation. Importantly, data on two generations of speakers were gathered and compared to verify any generational effects. The purpose of this comparison is to see if greater contact with the homeland variety (1st generation speakers) or greater contact with English (2nd generation speakers) were significant factors. Additionally, two Polish-speaking lifetime residents of Poland were interviewed and their speech was analyzed to determine the use of pro-drop in the homeland variety.

Tokens of null and overt pronouns were extracted from the interviews of 8 heritage speakers, and coded and analyzed using Goldvarb. The linguistic factors studied, which are predicted to correlate to different rates of pro-drop, include: switch reference; person, number, and gender marking; tense; lexical items; collocations; and pronoun modification. Some of these factors were found to contribute to potential ambiguity of the referent and to predict categorical use of overt pronouns in Polish (McShane 2009).

Preliminary results indicate a greater rate of overt pronouns in 2nd generation speakers. Furthermore, while homeland speakers exhibit categorical use of overt pronouns following certain conjunctions, some 2nd generation speakers have extended this rule to include additional conjunction contexts. In general, 2nd generation speakers were closer to Toronto English in their use of null pronouns, while 1st generation speakers were closer to their counterparts in Poland. Additionally, some degree of change towards English was also observed in 1st generation speakers, showing that majority languages influence the speech of not only individuals growing up in that environment, but also the speech of individuals who grew up elsewhere.

The results of this study are more broadly discussed as evidence of the susceptibility of grammatical features, such as pro-drop, to change in contact situations.

References:

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