

(In)complete grammar: Insights from Heritage Bulgarian

Teodora Radeva-Bork

(University of Potsdam)

Heritage speakers are notorious for having tremendous variance within their populations- from very high proficiency cases where some registers may be affected, to so-called overhearers (Au et al. 2002). Specific linguistic features in the heritage language competence and use may be affected by factors, such as sociopolitical factors, language practices, such as input and use, or level of education, attitudes and beliefs. Heritage speakers may acquire a divergent grammar, if the input is only qualitatively different, or an incomplete grammar, if the input is also quantitatively impoverished (Sorace 2005). This also leads to the question of age of onset and degree of attainment, i.e. full acquisition vs. incomplete acquisition.

This paper contributes to the current discussion on the nature of grammar in Heritage languages by reporting unprecedented data from Heritage Bulgarian. We present results from an in-depth study of two Heritage Bulgarian children, whose dominant language is German. The children are siblings, a boy aged 4;9 and a girl aged 10;9. Prior to the experiments, we interviewed and recorded the children and their parents, who additionally filled in a detailed language-background questionnaire giving information about the language input and language practices of the children and of the family. Consequently, we examined the children's comprehension and production of Bulgarian by means of multiple measures in order to avoid task effects. The employed tasks were: Elicitation of narratives based on the so-called Frog Story design (Berman & Slobin 1994), a role-play situation to elicit spontaneous speech, sentence-picture matching, and elicited production and comprehension of narratives using the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) (Gagarina et al. 2012, 2015). We employed these multiple measures to test elicited oral production and auditory comprehension since if a heritage speaker's grammar deviates from the target grammar in terms of a particular grammatical property, this should be observed across different tasks. We refrained from written tests with the older child since heritage speakers do better in oral tasks which do not require metalinguistic reflection (Bowles 2011, Montrul et al. 2008).

The data is illuminative with respect to a number of properties of Heritage Bulgarian grammar in terms of lexis, morphology, and syntax. Generally, the children display more errors in morphology – overmarking, substitutions, use of full pronouns instead of clitics, hypercorrection, fossilized L1 errors, such as regularization of irregular morphological derivatives, e.g. in verb morphology – than in syntax. The errors in morphology partly parallel what can be found in the course of general linguistic development of monolinguals, though at a later stage (cf. Polinsky et al. 2010). Concerning syntax, the results show different transfer effects (between German and Bulgarian) with regards to the grammatical properties concerned. For example, the production of variable word order in Heritage Bulgarian seems unproblematic (see, however, Polinsky et al. 2010 for different results in Heritage Mandarin). The production of negation, i.e. the correct placement of the Bulgarian negative marker, is problematic and seems to be influenced by the syntactic properties of German negation. In the lexical domain, we find strong interference from German as the children produce a number of creative, novel compounds, which are not typical for Bulgarian, e.g. Bulgarian: *korabski kapitan* instead of *kapitan na korab*, German: *Schiffskapitän* “ship captain”. Although some effects may be due to interference from German, not all of the deficient areas are exactly the ones where the two languages differ structurally. This could mean that some of the observable differences are the result of interference from German whereas others may follow from more general principles of language and change. The results are also discussed individually for the children showing that when compared to the older child, the younger child's performance is closer to the baseline.

Heritage Bulgarian differs notably from the baseline native Bulgarian in terms of lexical and morphological properties but less so in terms of syntax. These differences may have their roots in phenomena besides transfer from the dominant German language. Generally, it could be identified that Heritage Bulgarian displays some of the characteristic properties of other heritage languages: reduced complexity, lexical access difficulties, over-regularization, and fossilized L1 errors. On the basis of the investigation of Heritage Bulgarian, we can also conclude that morphology seems to be a more vulnerable domain than syntax.

References

- Au, T.K., L.M. Knightly, S.-A. Jun, J.S. Oh.** 2002. "Overhearing a language during childhood". *Psychological Science* 13: 238-243.
- Berman, R.A., D.I. Slobin.** 1994. *Relating events in narrative: A cross-linguistic developmental study*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- Bowles, M.** 2011. "Measuring implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge: What can heritage language learners contribute?" *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 33: 247-271.
- Gagarina, N., D. Klop, S. Kunnari, K. Tantele, T. Välimaa, I. Balčiūnienė, U. Bohnacker, J. Walters.** 2012. MAIN: Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives, *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 56. Berlin: ZAS.
- Gagarina, N., D. Klop, S. Kunnari, K. Tantele, T. Välimaa, I. Balčiūnienė, U. Bohnacker, J. Walters.** 2015. "Assessment of Narrative Abilities in Bilingual Children". In S. Armon-Lotem, J. de Jong, N. Meir (eds.). *Assessing Multilingual Children*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 243-269.
- Montrul, S., R. Foote, S. Perpiñán.** 2008. "Gender agreement in adult second language learners and Spanish heritage speakers: the effects of age and context of acquisition". *Language Learning* 58: 503-53.
- Polinsky M., Zhang B., Gallo C.G.** 2010. Eliciting heritage speakers' production, in MIMS. Hamburg, Germany: Hamburg University.
- Sorace, A.** 2005. "Syntactic optionality at interfaces". In Cornips, L. & K. Corrigan (eds). *Syntax and Variation: Reconciling the Biological and the Social*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 46-111.