

A Comparative Study of Heritage Russian in Contact with Hebrew and English

Clara Fridman, Natalia Meir

Bar Ilan University, The Department of English Literature and Linguistics

clarafridman@gmail.com, natalia.meir@biu.ac.il

The present study compares the performance of adult heritage language (HL) Russian speakers in Israel and the United States on a variety of morphosyntactic phenomena. This is among the first studies comparing early bilingual adults to each other, rather than to monolinguals. Heritage speakers grow up speaking a language at home that is different from the dominant societal language (SL) (Benmamoun et al, 2013; Polinsky, 2018; Montrul, 2016; Rothman, 2009). Their bilingual language development becomes unbalanced and their SL, although it is their second language, becomes their stronger one. HL grammar is affected by various internal and external factors, most notably cross-linguistic influence (CLI) and diminished input (Ortega, 2020; Polinsky & Scontras, 2019). CLI refers to transfer and imposition of one language's features onto the other, suggesting that features of the HL which are similar to those of the SL will be maintained better than those that are different. Diminished input posits that speakers with greater exposure to the HL, and later onset of the SL, will be more proficient. We focus on HL Russian in contact with two SLs, Hebrew and English, chosen for their morphosyntactic differences both from each other and from Standard Russian.

A total of 65 participants were sampled: 36 from the US and 29 from Israel. All participants were born in their country of residence or immigrated from the former USSR prior to age 5. The two groups were matched for age and sex and did not differ on background measures (ie. SL age of onset, etc). The two groups exhibited comparable performance on an objective vocabulary baseline derived through a picture-naming task. Vocabulary size was found to be highly correlated with Russian use at home and at work. Participants were then tested on three experimental tasks assessing production accuracy of adjective-noun agreement, the accusative case, and numeral-noun phrases.

Our results found that the SL-Hebrew group performed significantly better on adjective-noun agreement and numeral-noun expressions, with no notable group differences on the accusative case. A series of stepwise regressions showed vocabulary to be the greatest predictor for each task, pointing to the effects of input, as vocabulary measures are considered highly sensitive to input quantity and quality. This may be attributed to an Israeli sociolinguistic advantage, as Russian is the top HL in Israel and is much less common in the US. An additional Group effect was found for adjective-noun agreement, indicating presence of CLI: unlike English, Hebrew and Russian both mark grammatical gender. Our findings paint a complex picture of the interactions between CLI and input, with both playing a key role in HL proficiency. The next stage of this study will include a detailed qualitative analysis at the individual level.

References

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