

Subject realization in heritage Polish: A comparison of different age groups

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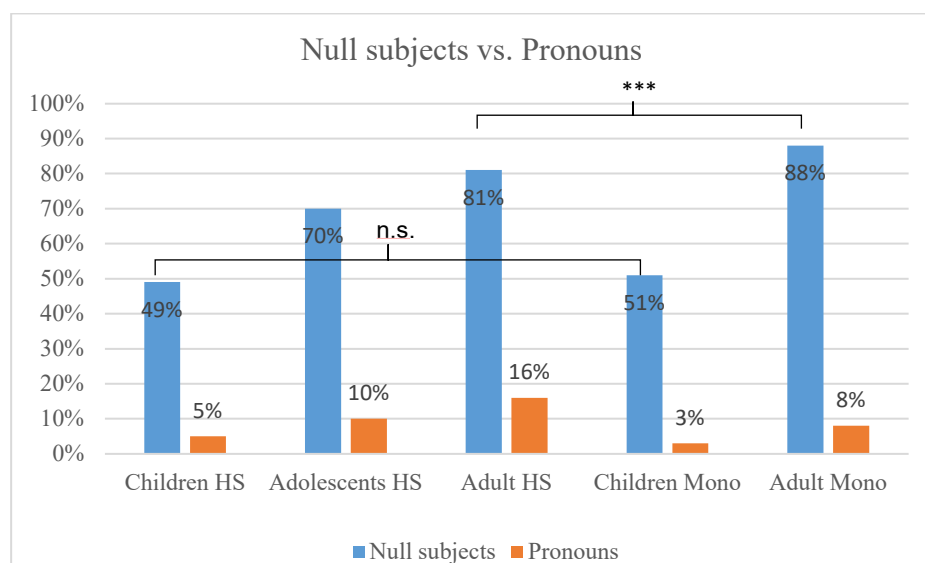
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The choice of referential expressions has been identified as a challenging domain for heritage speakers (HS) because it requires the integration of syntactic, pragmatic and discourse information. A lot of studies revealed that HS tend to overuse overt subjects in pro-drop heritage languages (HL). This has been found for many Romance HL, Greek, Turkish or Russian (e.g. Montrul 2004; Serratrice et al. 2004; Haznedar 2010; Tsimpli et al. 2004; Ivanova-Sullivan 2014). However, some studies have found no evidence for the overuse of overt subjects in child (Wolleb 2013) or adult HS (Nagy et al. 2011; Schmitz et al. 2016). A possible reason for this inconclusive evidence might be the fact that the studies mostly focus on only one age group of heritage speakers (children or adults). For other domains at the syntax/discourse interface (e.g. word order) it has been claimed that non-target like structures in HL development may disappear over time (cf., e.g., Kupisch 2014).

To check this hypothesis, the present study looks at the use of null and overt subjects in different age groups of Polish HS in Germany, thus contributing new data from a hitherto understudied language combination. Polish represents a pro drop-language, while German is a topic drop-language. The data come from elicited oral speech. The age groups covered in the analysis include: (i) children between 4;11 and 6;11 (n=14); (ii) children between 7;2 and 9;11 (n=24); (iii) children between 10;2 and 13;11 (n=19); (iv) teenagers from 15 to 17 years (n=15) and (v) (young) adults from 18 to 36 (n=30). The groups were additionally split according to their age of onset of the acquisition of the majority language German into simultaneous (n=61) and early sequential bilinguals (n=41). They were compared to two age groups of Polish monolinguals who were exposed to the same tasks (group 1: 4-12 years, n=20; group 2: 19-38, n=30).

A preliminary study on a smaller subsample showed that the child and adolescent Polish HS did not use more overt subjects when compared to their age-matched monolingual peers. Only within the group of adults we found a significant overuse of overt subjects compared to monolingual adults (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Relative frequency of null and pronominal subjects in different age groups of Polish heritage speakers (HS) in Germany and monolingual (Mono) Polish peers



These findings support that distributional patterns of overt and null subjects may change over time. In line with Silva-Corvalán (2014) we propose an account that identifies ongoing attrition of the null subject parameter due to cross-linguistic influence from German as the main reason for the overuse of overt subjects by our oldest HSs. Our data, however, offer no support for an effect of AoO on subject realization in heritage Polish.

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