Contact-related and input-related factors in auxiliary selection

Evidence from Italo-Romance varieties

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In this paper we provide a comparative account of auxiliary selection in two heritage language (HL) communities of Italian origin, in Argentina and in the UK. We use the term Italo-Romance heritage languages (IRHLs) as a cover term to refer to both standard Italian and primary dialects spoken in Italy.

Most Italo-Romance varieties are characterized by split intransitivity in the selection of the perfective auxiliary: intransitive verbs select 'be' or 'have' in the formation of the analytical past tense according to syntactic and semantic properties (Cennamo 2001, Sorace 2000). As a general rule, inergative verbs select 'have'; unaccusative, passive and reflexive verbs select 'be'; see standard Italian in ex. (1)-(2):

(1)   Maria è   caduta
       Maria be:AUX.3SG   fallen
       'Maria has fallen/fell'

(2)   Maria ha   dormito
       Maria have:AUX.3SG   slept
       'Maria has slept/slept'

Split intransitivity is hardly maintained as it is in IRHL communities: several HL settings show a greater variation in auxiliary selection with respect to homeland varieties. To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon we compare data from two different HL settings: Piedmontese communities in Argentina and the Campanian community in Bedford (UK). The two settings allow us to compare Piedmontese and Campanian Italo-Romance dialects, in contact respectively with Spanish and English, two languages that do not have auxiliary selection.

In the Piedmontese HL variety, split intransitivity tends to be lost, as 'have' is generalized as a perfective auxiliary with verbs of any class; see ex. (3)

(3)   l'ha   stait   lì   l'ha   fait   la   cosecha   e tut.
       have.3SG   been   there   have.3SG   done   the   harvest   and all

       dòpo   l'ha   andait an là
       afterwards   have.3SG   gone   in there
       'he has been there, I has done the harvest and afterwards he went there'

However, variation is still present in the data, and will be described in relation with social and acquisitional features of the speakers.

A different picture is offered by the data from the UK: here, the analysis shows that 'be' may be selected instead of 'have' with inergative verbs and with specific persons, namely 1pl, 1sg, and 3sg. The selection of 'be' is also sensitive of the language used by the speakers: it is higher when they speak dialect and but absent if they speak Italian. When migrants speak Italian, they select 'have' with this kind of verbs as in Standard Italian.

Based on the framework by Benmamoun et al. (2013), Polinsky & Scontras (2020), we provide a comparison between the two case studies, aimed at highlighting the dynamics to which IRHL varieties are subject. We make a distinction between contact-related innovations, depending on grammatical features of the dominant language, and input-related innovations, depending on acquisitional factors characterizing specific HL scenarios, as well as on inherent patterns of variation in the input.

References

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