

The acquisition of heritage prosody in bilingual vs. multilingual children: Russian heritage children in Madrid and Catalonia

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Abstract

Increased migration and globalization have led to an increase in heritage language (migrant minority, HL) speakers and to the establishment of bilingual / multilingual communities. While the maintenance of HL is beneficial for children's well-being (De Houwer, 2015) and academic performance (Ganuza & Hedman, 2019), the understanding of HL acquisition is far from complete. A number of demographic and linguistic variables (e.g., age of onset, SES, accessibility to literacy, language combination) have been shown to have a role but the effect of sociolinguistic factors is less clear. This project analyzes the role of sociolinguistic context and compares HL acquisition in monolingual vs. bilingual regions. We analyze two contexts of Spain, monolingual Spanish-speaking Madrid vs. bilingual Spanish-Catalan-speaking regions. To assess HL acquisition, we focus on one of the least studied in the heritage language acquisition literature linguistic aspects, namely, prosody, and study Russian heritage language.

Data collection is on-going. Two groups of 5-to 8-year-old children are tested: Russian-Spanish bilinguals from Madrid and Russian-Spanish-Catalan multilinguals from Catalonia. The children will take the prosodic test, the adapted Russian version of the APT (Pronina et al., 2019), which allows the elicitation of semi-spontaneous utterances. Native Russian speakers will judge the prosodic productions in terms of accentedness on a scale from “no accent” to “strong accent”, and an additional forced-choice question about accented features (e.g., melody / speed / consonants / vowels) will be asked if “strong accent” is identified. A series of control tasks will also be collected (sentence repetition and narratives in all languages, LITMUS-SRep, Marinis & Armon-Lotem, 2015, MAIN, Gagarina et al., 2019).

The main hypothesis is that Catalan, as a minority language with a valued identity, will have a beneficial effect on HL acquisition (Cortès-Colomé et al., 2016). Therefore, we expect that multilingual heritage Russian children will outperform their heritage Russian peers growing up in the monolingual society in terms of prosodic development, as they will be perceived as more native like compared to bilingual children.

This study contributes to the emerging body of research concerning language acquisition in diverse groups of bi- and multilingual speakers, with a particular focus on prosody.