

Null and overt subjects in Italian and Spanish heritage speakers in Germany



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Abstract

This paper bridges a gap in the ongoing research on heritage languages (HL), their acquisition, and the nature of transfer in HL with a comparative study on two understudied language combinations, namely Italian and Spanish heritage speakers (HS) raised in Germany with two native languages ($n = 18$). Their data will be compared with those of first generation Italian and Spanish immigrants ($n = 18$) in Germany (L1/L2 speakers) and those of control groups of monolingual Italian and Spanish speakers ($n = 17$). Neither the quantitative analysis of their subject production (in total and related to grammatical person) nor the qualitative analysis regarding pragmatic appropriateness of null and overt subjects show significant differences between the HS and the respective monolingual groups, which would constitute evidence for incomplete acquisition (HS) or language attrition (L1/L2 speakers). The statistical analyses reveal grammatical person to be the main language internal factor determining subject realization, in contrast to group membership. The detected differences between the bilingual groups and the monolingual control group are better interpreted as individual variation.

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1. Introduction

The goal of this study is to contribute to the linguistic investigation of Italian as used by adult Italian-German bilinguals and Spanish as used by adult Spanish-German bilinguals. These two groups of immigrants, present in Germany since the late 1950s, speak related (Romance) languages as first (L1) or heritage language (HL). They differ in many language-external aspects which may have an impact on the maintenance of the HL, in particular the size and age structure of the community, as well as integration and education success (see Bierbach and Birken-Silverman, 2003). Despite the aforementioned differences, both HL are present in everyday life in Germany, particularly in North Rhine-Westphalia where the participants of the present study live. This raises the question of the role of and the relationship between language-internal and external factors in HL acquisition and maintenance. Comparing the two communities in a grammatical domain, which these Romance languages largely share, helps to understand the importance of language-internal factors as opposed to language-external ones. An ideal candidate for such a grammatical domain is complex and vulnerable enough in order to facilitate change or loss of properties of the HL under particular input conditions. This holds, among others, for (null) subjects which involve the syntax-discourse interface and represent a well-known phenomenon for

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cross-linguistic influence (CLI) in various language combinations in bilingual first language acquisition (English/Spanish: see, e.g., [Paradis and Navarro, 2003](#); English/Italian: see [Serratrice and Sorace, 2002](#); [Serratrice et al., 2004](#); Italian/Spanish: see [Sorace et al., 2009](#); German/Italian: see, e.g., [Schmitz et al., 2012](#); [Patuto, 2012](#); German/Spanish: see [Patuto, 2012](#)). Transfer/CLI has also been observed in second language acquisition (L2 Spanish: see, e.g., [Rothman, 2009b](#); [de Prada Pérez and Pascual y Cabo, 2012](#); L2 Italian: see, e.g., [Belletti et al., 2007](#); [Kupisch, 2012](#)) and in HL, in the latter, however, mostly relating to the language combination English-Spanish (see, e.g., [Silva-Corvalán, 1977, 1994](#); [Montrul, 2004](#)). The language combinations of two similar but not identical Romance null subject languages with the non-null subject language German should therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of HL acquisition and maintenance, in particular with respect to the role of language-internal (i.e., the involved grammatical features) and language-external factors but also with respect to comparisons among different language combinations which are still rare in HL development studies.

Throughout this paper, HS will be defined following [Valdés \(2005\)](#) and [Rothman and Treffers-Daller \(2014\)](#): HS are bilinguals living in a social and familial setting with a different language (a minority language) from that of the majority of speakers surrounding them, whose HL acquisition occurred as part of natural language acquisition at a pre-school age. The bilinguals under investigation include Italian and Spanish heritage speakers (HS) who were born in Germany and acquired both languages simultaneously, at the latest at preschool age, and speakers of the first immigrant generation from Italy and Spain who acquired their Romance language as L1 in Italy/Spain and German as L2 after migrating to Germany (L1 Romance/L2 German groups). The duration of their stay in Germany ranges from 1 to 49 years, the youngest arrived at age 6, the majority, however, in their early twenties (maximum 22 years).

Although many researchers base their work on the fundamental definition of HS by [Valdés \(2000, 2005\)](#), two very different theoretical approaches evolved in order to explain the observed differential language use and knowledge by HS: the first is based on the assumption of language loss which shows up as language attrition (LA) in the first migrant generation and incomplete acquisition (IA) in second and further generations. LA refers to eroded features of the L1 after its complete acquisition and a phase of stability (e.g., [Sorace, 2003](#); [Tsimpli et al., 2004](#)), while IA occurs in childhood due to insufficient input to maintain or develop the full system of the L1 (e.g., [Domínguez, 2009](#); [Montrul, 2004, 2010](#)). In contrast, the second approach presumes processes of linguistic change in a completely acquired contact variety of the native language by the HS. In this approach, the discussion of the modifications of the input in the first migration generation plays a crucial role (see in particular the missing-input competence divergence approach by [Pires and Rothman, 2009](#), and the propositions for a modeling of HS grammars by [Putnam and Sánchez, 2013](#)).

Section 2 presents both theoretical frameworks in more detail. The present paper works in line with the second approach. The results of our study lead us to assume that the investigated Romance-German bilinguals show effects of neither LA in case of the L1 (Romance)/L2 (German) speakers nor of IA in case of HS in the examined grammatical domain of their HL. Furthermore, we will suggest that the variability observed in the investigated groups reflects individual choices in the use of subject pronouns (which also exist in monolingual speakers) rather than evidence for LA or IA.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 presents the crucial concepts of the HL acquisition debate. Section 3 describes the subject systems of Italian, Spanish, and German. Section 4 deals with previous studies on (null) subjects in Romance HL and presents our research questions and predictions. Section 5 describes the participants, data collection and methods of our study. Section 6 provides the quantitative and qualitative analyses of our data. In section 7, the data will be discussed and section 8 concludes the article.

2. State of research on HL acquisition

This section presents the aforementioned two main positions in research on HL acquisition including the pending issues in the ongoing debate which concern primarily the nature of HS, the concept of IA, and the role of properties of the input (see [Guijarro-Fuentes and Schmitz, 2015](#)).

The incomplete acquisition approach emphasizes the variability of HL competence alluded to by [Valdés \(2000, 2005\)](#). An important concept of this approach is the baseline language, a concept drawn originally from creole languages where the baseline language is that of the lexifier language. [Polinsky and Kagan \(2007:370ff.\)](#) argue that the baseline language for HS is the language that the learner was exposed to as a child, i.e., his/her parents' language (first generation immigrants), not the norm or standard language available to fully competent speakers. As a consequence, the proficiency of HS is classified according to the distance from the baseline: [Polinsky and Kagan \(2007:372\)](#) place the different types of HS on a continuum of competence where the most competent ones can at best achieve an *acrolect*, but not a full level of the baseline, combined possibly with a good knowledge of the standard. The distinction of baseline language and standard in Polinsky and Kagan corresponds, to our understanding, to a native oral competence acquired in early childhood (baseline) whereas the standard is the oral and written official norm, a variety acquired, e.g., at school. Excluding the HS from a full competence of the baseline amounts to denying their native like competence.

The proponents of the language loss approach explain the variability of HL competence as a result of LA in first generation migrants and IA in subsequent generations (e.g., [Montrul, 2004, 2008, 2010](#); [Montrul and Bowles, 2009](#);

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