



Understanding heritage language acquisition. Some contributions from the research on heritage speakers of European Portuguese

Cristina Maria Moreira Flores *

University of Minho, Portugal

Received 3 June 2013; received in revised form 11 September 2014; accepted 12 September 2014

Available online 14 October 2014

Abstract

The present paper aims to contribute to our understanding of heritage language acquisition by focusing on the results of three studies on heritage speakers of European Portuguese living in Germany (Flores and Barbosa, 2014; Santos and Flores, 2013; Rinke and Flores, 2014), thus highlighting the European perspective on this topic. The participants of these studies are second-generation immigrants who use their heritage language productively in their daily interactions. In particular it is argued that heritage speakers are highly proficient bilingual speakers who develop a particular linguistic knowledge because they are exposed to particular input conditions. In this sense, the proficiency of heritage speakers cannot be described as the outcome of a deficient, incomplete acquisition process, but rather as an instance of native language development.

© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: European Portuguese; Heritage speaker; Native speaker; Clitics; VP ellipsis; Input

1. Introduction

Research on heritage bilingualism has grown substantially in the last decades, especially in the United States and in Canada, where the term “heritage speaker” (HS) was originally proposed to describe bilingual speakers with a migration background (Cummins, 2005). However, the use of a new term does not mean that this «recent» research on heritage language (HL) development has found a previously unknown group of speakers. This is far from true as stated, for instance, by Kupisch (2013) or Meisel (2013). HSs are included in the group of bilingual speakers, who were the focus of analysis of several studies devoted to understanding the nature of early bilingual language acquisition (either simultaneous or successive) since the 1980s. The recent focus on a particular type of bilingual speaker, designated as HS, is mainly a functional restriction based on sociolinguistic criteria (Meisel, 2014; Rothman, 2009). In ongoing research, the term typically refers to speakers who grow up as second-generation immigrants in speech communities where the majority language is not their home language, and their dominant language is that of the host country (Benmamoun et al., 2013). Therefore, what characterizes heritage language development is a specific acquisition setting and particular input conditions, namely a more intensive exposure to their heritage language in early years (up to age three or four) and a

* Correspondence to: Departamento de Estudos Germanísticos e Eslovos, Universidade do Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710 Braga, Portugal.
Tel.: +351 962324988.

E-mail addresses: cflores@ilch.uminho.pt, cmmflores@gmail.com.

significant shift of input toward the majority language in later years (after age four/five). Thus, in heritage language research, one must not ignore the findings on bilingual language acquisition reported over the last thirty years, but rather enrich them with the study of a particular speaker profile. In order to succeed in this task it is vital to study homogeneous groups of speakers by controlling factors such as age of onset of acquisition, amount of input from both languages and level of schooling in the heritage language.

As stated by Kupisch (2013), European-based research has already added significantly to our current understanding of bilingual language acquisition, but the latest focus on bilingual speakers who are defined by particular sociolinguistic factors may receive further interesting contributions from the European perspective.

Europe has a long migration tradition and in many European countries, such as France, Germany or Switzerland, there are already fourth-generation citizens with a migration background. The particularity of the European migration flow bears some important differences to non-European realities. Actually, a significant part of the migration movement in Europe is made up of citizens from EU and non-EU countries. This implies a political, geographical and often also cultural closeness which is mostly absent in immigration flows to the US, for instance. This proximity, allied with the multilingual effort, which constitutes – at least in theory – one basic principle of EU politics, may contribute to a more explicit endeavor to maintain the language of origin. The wish of adult immigrants to retain the home language, especially for the benefit of their children, is often linked to the desire of a limited migration period. As a result, European heritage speaker communities may show more homogeneity than the groups of heritage speakers studied in the American context, particularly as regards their HL proficiency. Many European countries promote heritage language programs for immigrant children, either supported by the country of origin, by immigrant associations in the host country or by the host government. For instance, in Germany there are afternoon or Saturday schools that teach, inter alia, Greek, Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Portuguese, and Russian to heritage children. Obviously this does not mean that every immigrant child has received instruction in his/her native language, or that all heritage speakers in Germany are fully proficient L1 speakers, but it does mean that many heritage speakers share a common sociolinguistic background, which facilitates the research in this area. The factor ‘type and quantity of L1 input’, which is crucial in heritage language acquisition, may be more controlled if a more homogeneous sociolinguistic background underlies the research into the linguistic competence of a given immigrant community.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of heritage language acquisition by presenting the results of three studies on heritage speakers of European Portuguese (EP) who live in Germany. In particular, I will argue that the results of these studies do not support the idea that a heritage language is necessarily the outcome of an interrupted process of acquisition, as suggested in a wide range of studies on heritage speakers, especially from an American research perspective. Even though Portuguese heritage speakers differ from monolingually raised speakers of EP, the data show no evidence of lack of acquisition of the properties under investigation.

The paper is organized as follows. After a short introduction, Section 2 briefly discusses some theoretical approaches to the nature of heritage language, especially the factors that might influence HL development. Section 3 characterizes the group of Portuguese heritage speakers living in Germany. In line with the factors outlined in Section 2, some predictions are formulated in Section 4 on heritage language acquisition, which will be tested in the three studies presented in Section 5. Finally, the last section explains the contributions of these studies to the current understanding of heritage language acquisition and discusses open questions for further research.

2. Understanding heritage language acquisition

When an adult immigrant leaves his/her home country at an advanced age, his/her L1 competence tends to remain stable through life. Little or no erosion effects have been found in such speakers (Altenberg, 1991; Köpke, 1999; Schoenmakers-Klein, 1989). However, when the change of environment happens in early childhood, the competence of immigrant children in the weakening language tends to fluctuate (Kaufman, 2001; Seliger, 1989; Turian and Altenberg, 1991).

Montrul (2008) and Polinsky (2006, 2008), among many others, explain this deviant development as incomplete acquisition; but what does incompleteness in acquisition mean? For Montrul (2008) “incomplete L1 acquisition occurs in childhood when, for different reasons, some specific properties of the language do not have a chance to reach age-appropriate levels of proficiency after intense exposure to the L2 begins” (Montrul, 2008:21). According to this view, a heritage speaker is, therefore, a bilingual speaker who has a deficient knowledge of his/her heritage language, because he/she has not fully acquired it.

Many authors have argued against this interpretation of the term «incomplete acquisition» (Kupisch, 2013; Meisel, 2013, 2014; Pascual y Cabo and Rothman, 2012; Pires and Rothman, 2009; Pires, 2011), claiming that, due to their inborn faculty of language, bilingual children naturally acquire the properties which are present in their input. If a given property is not present, either because the adult interlocutors (e.g. the parents) do not use it or because the child does not have the opportunity to access language registers where it occurs, this means that the heritage child will probably fail to acquire

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/935330>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/935330>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)