



Exploring the source of differences and similarities in L1 attrition and heritage speaker competence: Evidence from pronominal resolution

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Abstract

Several studies of different bilingual groups including L2 learners, child bilinguals, heritage speakers and L1 attriters reveal similar performance on syntax-discourse interface properties such as anaphora resolution (Sorace, 2011 and references therein). Specifically, bilinguals seem to allow more optionality in the interpretation of overt subject pronouns in null subject languages, such as Greek, Italian and Spanish while the interpretation of null subject pronouns is indistinguishable from monolingual natives. Nevertheless, there is some evidence pointing to bilingualism effects on the interpretation of null subject pronouns too in heritage speakers' grammars (Montrul, 2004) due to some form of 'arrested' development in this group of bilinguals. The present study seeks to investigate similarities and differences between two Greek–Swedish bilingual groups, heritage speakers and L1 attriters, in anaphora resolution of null and overt subject pronouns in Greek using a self-paced listening with a sentence-picture matching decision task at the end of each sentence. The two groups differ in crucial ways: heritage speakers were simultaneous or early bilinguals while the L1 attriters were adult learners of the second language, Swedish. Our findings reveal differences from monolingual preferences in the interpretation of the overt pronoun for both heritage and attrited speakers while the differences attested between the two groups in the interpretation of null subject pronouns affect only response times with heritage being faster than attrited speakers. We argue that our results do not support an age of onset or differential input effects on bilingual performance in pronoun resolution.

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1. Introduction

Various studies of language processing and production in bilingual speakers have shown effects of crosslinguistic influence (CI), that is, effects of one language on the other (e.g. Cuza et al., 2013; Müller and Hulk, 2001; Yip and Matthews, in preparation, 2007; Unsworth, 2012 for child bilinguals; Rothman and Iverson, 2013; Francis, 2005, for adult

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bilinguals). Crosslinguistic influence has been argued to be restricted to certain domains of language and with a specified direction for each phenomenon, *i.e.* from language X to language Y but not *vice versa*. Tsimpli et al. (2004) for example argue that the overuse of Greek or Italian overt pronouns by attrited speakers is affected by English, a language with only one pronominal option for topic-continuity and topic-shift. This unidirectionality of CI has been attested for other syntactic phenomena too, such as word-order, overuse of null objects, complement ordering of pre- and postpositions and relative clauses (Dopke, 1998; Müller and Hulk, 2001; Yip and Matthews, 2000; Cuza et al., 2013; Argyri and Sorace, 2007).

In the present study we focus on an extensively studied interface phenomenon, namely pronominal resolution with the aim of addressing the question of whether two groups of bilingual speakers, an older and a younger group, reveal different interpretation preferences for null and overt pronouns. Specifically, we experimentally examine the interpretation of Greek null and overt subject pronouns in terms of the selection of a subject, object or 'other' referent as the preferred antecedent of the pronoun. The two bilingual groups consist of adult Greek–Swedish speakers. The older group includes adults who developed knowledge of L2 Swedish in adulthood whereas the younger group includes younger adults who had bilingual exposure from preschool age. Potentially, the older group meets the characterization of non-pathological first language attrition in adulthood due to second language influence, in that these once monolingual Greek speakers might be affected by their late-developed bilingualism in L2 Swedish.⁴ The younger group includes early-sequential bilinguals of Greek and Swedish who acquired Greek naturalistically in early childhood as a “home” language in Sweden. This group is thus a typical heritage speakers' group (see *e.g.* Montrul, 2008a,b; Rothman, 2009).

In non-pathological cases, first language (L1) attrition is viewed as a process during which a native speaker of a language who has grown up monolingual shows signs of changes in his native language use as a result of extensive contact with a second language (see *e.g.* Schmid, 2011 for review). L1 attriters typically preserve most core syntactic aspects of their native language such as basic word order, head directionality, syntactic licensing of empty categories and the like (see Cuza, 2010, Cuza, 2013; Domínguez, 2009, 2013; Gürel, 2002; Iverson, 2012) but show effects of attrition in other domains. In particular, attrition effects have been found in lexical retrieval and access (Kohnert et al., 1999; Köpke, 2002, among others), pragmatic transfer of L2 concepts (Pavlenko, 2000) and discourse-related features of pronominal resolution relevant to the syntax-discourse interface (Gürel, 2004; Tsimpli et al., 2004; Tsimpli, 2007; Sorace, 2005, 2011). The severity of the effects varies and depends on various factors such as the regularity of L1 use and the length of L2 exposure and use.

A different developmental situation with effects on L1 performance has been associated with heritage speakers (*e.g.* Montrul, 2008a,b; Polinsky, 2011; Rothman, 2007; Pires and Rothman, 2009). Although it is hard to provide an exhaustive definition of heritage speakers to which all would subscribe (see for discussion Beaudrie and Fairclough, 2012; Montrul, 2008a,b; Polinsky and Kagan, 2007; Rothman, 2009), a typical case would be early bilinguals exposed to one language from birth, which happens to be different from the majority language and the main language of education in the society in which they grow up. Heritage speakers have been shown to differ from monolingual natives but also from second language learners in various interesting respects (Montrul, 2004, 2008a,b). Apart from lexical retrieval difficulties (see Ecker, 2004 for heritage speakers; see Hulsen, 2000; Montrul, 2008a,b; Schmid, 2002; Schmid and Köpke, 2008; Pavlenko, 2003, 2004 for attriters), heritage speakers have been shown to exhibit difficulties in other areas of grammar (Montrul, 2008a,b; Polinsky, 1997, 2007). A linguistic area most noticeably affected is inflectional morphology. Heritage speakers of grammatical gender languages produce a significant number of gender errors compared to monolinguals. For example, although monolingual Russian and Spanish-speaking children control gender marking by age 4 with almost 100% accuracy (with the exception of irregular and less frequent forms), Polinsky (2008) and Montrul (2008a,b) have shown that heritage speakers display high error rates ranging from 5% to 25%. In the verbal domain, the tense system can also be affected. Heritage speakers of Spanish and Russian confuse aspectual distinctions between perfective and imperfective forms (Polinsky, 2007; Silva-Corvalán, 1994). Moreover, in reference to agreement and the distribution of null and overt subjects in null subject languages, it has been shown that this syntax-discourse interface phenomenon is also a vulnerable domain: Spanish and Russian heritage speakers have been found to overuse overt subjects in contexts where a null subject would be pragmatically more appropriate (Montrul, 2004; Polinsky, 2007; Tsimpli et al., 2004).

As mentioned, L1 attrition usually affects non-core properties of the language. We know that differences in heritage grammars are not solely confined to non-core areas *per se* although basic properties such as macro-parametric properties (*e.g.* basic word order, head-directionality and the like) seem unaffected. However, it is often the case that highly significant divergences are found in non-core areas of grammar, for example, Montrul (2004) found that the discourse regulated distribution of null and overt subjects in heritage speakers of Spanish differs from monolingual norms in that null and overt subjects are used in contexts where they are pragmatically unexpected. Following Pires and Rothman (2009),

⁴ Whether this is actual influence of Swedish on the representation of the grammatical system of Greek, or a processing issue affecting processing the first language (Greek) or a combination of both are all empirical questions which cannot be addressed by the experimental task used here. We therefore have to leave this important issue aside for the purposes of the present paper.

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