

Convergence and divergence in heritage languages: considering the dominant language and the sociopolitical context

Silvina Montrul (Keynote speaker)

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

montrul@illinois.edu

Donnerstag,
05.03.2020
11:15–12:15
ESA1 HG HS J

AG 1

Heritage speakers grow up in a bilingual environment and as adults vary widely in their proficiency in the heritage language, ranging from receptive, low to highly fluent and native-like. Many of them, but not all, display “errors” typical of first and second language development, especially in aspects of grammar. Their grammatical knowledge diverges in several ways from the knowledge of their parents, the input providers.

Up until now, the vast majority of formal linguistic-oriented studies finding divergent outcomes have been conducted in the United States, a country that does not promote active and long-lasting bilingualism in immigrant families. While several factors determine the path and outcome of heritage language acquisition, research has mostly focused on the roles of the immediate input, language use, and language dominance. Less is known about how the larger sociopolitical context contributes to variation in heritage language development, heritage language maintenance and transmission in society more generally. Within this context, the role of the dominant language, largely ignored so far in heritage language studies, can also be examined.

In this talk, I discuss examples of convergent outcomes of heritage speakers with their input providers, and most of these studies have been conducted in parts of the world where bilingualism and multilingualism seem to have higher status than in the US. Convergent outcomes support the assertion that while heritage speakers are born with the cognitive capacity to learn their languages fully, the extent of heritage language acquisition is highly determined by the context.

I will then make a case for transnational studies of the same heritage language (Korean in the USA and in China, Spanish in USA and in Sweden; Russian in the USA, in Germany and in Israel), where both the role of majority language transfer and the larger sociopolitical context can be examined as sources of language variation. I argue that the language of heritage speakers looks the way it does, not because of deficiencies within the individual or their families, but because the educational practices, social attitudes and the broader political atmosphere deprive are not supportive of heritage language development. Understanding the external forces beyond the family that shape heritage language development and contribute to convergent and divergent outcomes is critical to understand their linguistic development and support the survival of heritage languages for several generations.