Language contact versus internal dynamics in heritage speakers' use of discourse markers

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Discourse markers (DM) constitute an open class of elements that is syntactically only loosely integrated and does not affect the truth value of propositions. This makes them particularly flexible and thus interesting for investigations of contact-linguistics vs. internal dynamics. In language contact situations, DM might be borrowed according to their "pragmatic detachability" (Matras 1998). In addition, they might undergo changes in function, and due to their multi-functionality, DM are also particularly useful fillers in online production.

The language use of heritage language speakers (HS) can differ from those of monolingual speakers in interesting ways. Heritage language use typically shows considerable inter-individual variation among HS of the same language (Montrul 2015, Rothman 2007). Also, HS might be more open to linguistic variation in their use of the majority language. It is an open question, though, whether these differences and the spectrum of variation are tied to specific registers, result from overall grammatical changes due to language-contact, or are a consequence of internal dynamics driving language change.

We present a cross-linguistic, comparative study of what happens to DM systems in different acquisition and contact scenarios. Our empirical basis is a subset of the RUEG corpus (Wiese et al. 2019). We investigate DM in bilingual speakers' language use for 16 German HS in the US, 16 bilingual speakers with German as a majority language in Germany, and 16 Turkish HS in Germany and compare the results to 16 monolingual speakers of German and Turkish. The data consists of two age groups: adults (22–35 years old) and adolescents (14–18 years old). Both different sociolinguistic settings and typological relations between the languages involved make the study particularly interesting. We cover different registers, taking into account that DM are typically distributed differentially across registers (Biber 2006).

Based on a comparative corpus study, we discuss the frequency of occurrence, the distribution of DM, and new structural and functional properties of various DM. The results from this analysis help to determine which patterns are due to language-internal tendencies of variation and change and which are due to contact-linguistic dynamics.

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