

Interface vulnerability and cross-linguistic influence in heritage speakers of Spanish

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This paper presents data from two studies on heritage speakers (HSs) of Spanish to answer the following questions: 1) Which elements of language are particularly vulnerable in language contact situations? 2) How much of the divergence is due to cross-linguistic influence?

Question 1 is approached from the perspective of the Interface Hypothesis (IH) (Sorace 2005), which predicts increased vulnerability for phenomena at the interface between two domains of language, especially the external interfaces connecting syntax to discourse/ pragmatics (Sorace & Serratrice 2009). Unlike most previous studies, which have tested the IH by comparing two completely different phenomena (e.g. Montrul 2008), this paper compares interfaces *within* phenomena, namely 1) the subjunctive and 2) subject position.

For the first study, 17 HSs of Spanish in the Netherlands and 18 Spanish-dominant controls were tested on their knowledge of the subjunctive in three different contexts, using an acceptability judgment task and an elicited production task. The results show that the HSs diverged most from monolingual controls in sentences in which the choice of mood depends on the pragmatic context. The divergence was smaller sentences in which mood is semantically determined, and smallest in a purely syntactic context. These results are in line with the IH.

To address question 2, HSs in two different countries (the Netherlands and the US) were compared in order to differentiate between transfer and language-internal change. 27 American HS of Spanish, 19 Dutch HS of Spanish and 20 Spanish-dominant controls were tested on their knowledge of three constraints determining word order in Spanish: one syntax-semantics interface factor – verb type – and two syntax-pragmatics/discourse factors – focus and definiteness. The results showed that the Dutch group was sensitive to verb type and definiteness, but not to focus, and the American group was sensitive only to verb type. The relative robustness of verb type and the vulnerability of focus are in line with the IH. The difference between the two groups with respect to definiteness is explained by influence from their respective majority languages: while Dutch exhibits a relation between definiteness and word order similar to Spanish, this effect is less pervasive in English.

Together, these two studies offer support for increased vulnerability at the external interface, while at the same time showing that the particular language combination matters, suggesting contact-induced change.

References: Montrul, S. (2008b). Incomplete acquisition in Spanish heritage speakers: Chronological age or interfaces vulnerability? In H. Chan, H. Jacob & E. Kapia (Eds.), BUCLD 32: Proceedings of the 32nd annual BUCLD. Somerville, MA: Cascadia Press, 299–310. Sorace, A. (2005). Selective optionality in language development. In: Cornips, L., Corrigan, K. P. (Eds.), *Syntax and variation: Reconciling the biological and the social*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 55–80. Sorace, A. & Serratrice, L. (2009). Internal and external interfaces in bilingual language development: Beyond structural overlap. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 13(2), 195–210.