Heritage Language Characteristics of Bimodal Bilinguals

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AG 2

When hearing children of Deaf, signing parents (Codas) are raised with a natural sign language such as American Sign Language (ASL) at home, these children may be considered *heritage language users*. Sociolinguistically, they satisfy the pattern of home language different from broader community language, with formal schooling in the community (spoken) language (see Chen Pichler, Lillo-Martin & Palmer 2018 and papers in that volume for discussion).

Codas also show similarities to heritage language users in that they vary notably in fluency with their sign language, which may lose dominance to the majority spoken language, especially once they enter school. As adults, although many embrace their identity as Codas, and some continue to use their sign language regularly in the Deaf community, others find their signing has greatly diminished and is used only rarely with their parents and limited others.

Codas, like other heritage language users, are then predicted to potentially display particular linguistic properties in the heritage sign language, including slower production rate, reduced number of complex structures, lower vocabulary diversity, and decreased Mean Length of Utterance. We assessed these predictions in a study of heritage signers in the US (ASL/English) and Brazil (Libras/Brazilian Portuguese). We found high variability across the participants in these features (replicating preliminary data from Brazil reported in Quadros & Lillo-Martin 2018).

Like other bilinguals, Codas may also engage in bilingual language phenomena such as code-switching. However, unlike unimodal bilinguals using two spoken languages, bimodal bilinguals using a sign language and a spoken language can also engage in code-blending, which functions similarly to code-switching but includes simultaneous production of signed and spoken linguistic elements (Emmorey et al. 2008). Code-blending is linguistically constrained, like code-switching is. Using both elicited production and grammaticality judgment tasks in the two groups of Codas, we observed constraints on code-blending by which limited structural conflicts between the languages can be permitted (Lillo-Martin et al. 2020). The asymmetry in such constraints indicates that heritage language effects are also at play here.

This presentation is based on work conducted in collaboration with many others, particularly Ronice Müller de Quadros, lead investigator of the Brazilian component.

References: Chen Pichler, D., Lillo-Martin, D. & J. Palmer (2018). A short introduction to heritage signers. Sign Language Studies 18(3), 309–327. Emmorey, K., Borinstein, H.B., Thompson, R. & T. H. Gollan (2008). Bimodal bilingualism. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition 11(1), 43–61. Lillo-Martin, D., Quadros, R.M. de, Bobaljik, J.D., Gagne, D., Kwok, L., Laszakovits, S., Mafra, M. & S. Wurmbrand (2020). Constraints on code-blending: Evidence from acceptability judgments. Linguistic Society of America Annual Meeting. Quadros, R.M. de & D. Lillo-Martin (2018). Brazilian bimodal bilinguals as heritage signers. Languages 3(3), 32.