

Spanish Heritage Speakers: Case Assignment in Spanish Relative Clauses

Previous studies have examined the acquisition of case assignment in Spanish heritage speakers (SHS) and determined that case assignment in SHS is not problematic for these speakers (Montrul & Bowles 2009). However, in the context of relative clauses this feature has not been examined. This study investigates the comprehension of case assignment in 3 types of Spanish relative clauses (Subject, Direct Object and Oblique) in SHS. Heritage speakers are usually raised in a minority language household, but their dominant language is the majority language of the society they live in. Although heritage speakers usually have near native phonological performance, they lack in other areas such as morphology or syntax. Furthermore, research has shown that the production and comprehension of the heritage speakers differ from native speakers. Thus, linguistic research has focused on two major questions: do these speakers completely acquire the language as children? Or do these speakers lose their minority language as adults? These processes are known respectively as incomplete acquisition or attrition. The present study contributes to the research corpus on heritage languages in order to determine vulnerability in morphosyntactic areas, as well as determining if heritage speakers suffer attrition or incomplete acquisition. Although it can be difficult to determine which of these processes affect the speaker, the results of this study suggest that in this case attrition is the cause of low speaker performance.

In Spanish, case assignment is no longer overt morphologically, although there are few traces in the pronominal system. However, Spanish has structural accusative and dative case which are usually marked by the preposition 'a'. Furthermore, objective case differentiates between Accusative case as the direct object of the verb, Dative case as the indirect object of the verb and Oblique as the object of the preposition (Zagona 2001). This phenomena was tested in the relative clause structure where studies have shown that subject relative clause are the easiest to acquire and comprehend, followed by direct object clauses, indirect object clauses and finally oblique object clauses (Polinsky 2011). Furthermore, in Spanish relative clauses have word order optionality where VS order can be inverted to SV due to pragmatic and phonological considerations called "Styl-Inv". Even though Spanish is an SVO language, in relative clauses the unmarked form is considered to be (O) VS which is the opposite of the unmarked form of declarative sentences (Perpiñan 2011). Based on the above the following hypothesis were formulated 1)SHS will have more difficulty interpreting object RC's than subject RC's; 2)SHS will have preference for Subject-Verb constructions even in RC's; 3) Thus, the follow accessibility hierarchy is expected from easiest in comprehension to hardest: *Subject RC VO > Direct Object RC SV > Oblique RC SV > Subject RC OV > Direct Object RC VS > Oblique RC VS*

Six SHS born and raised in the USA or Canada with Spanish speaking parents were tested in an online picture matching task of 24 target questions and 12 distractors. The pictures were organized in pairs with reversible action with animate references and each sentence was presented in audio for the participants to listen and then match to the corresponding picture in the pair. The 24 target tokens were divided in token sets of 4 in 6 categories: 1) Direct Object Relative clause with no inversion (ODVS); 2) Direct Object Relative clause with inversion (ODSV); 3) Prepositional Relative clause with no inversion (ObliqVS); 4) Prepositional Relative clause with inversion (ObliqSV); 5) Subject relative clause with no inversion (SVO); 6) Subject relative clause with inversion (SOV). The same task was performed by 6 native speakers of Spanish in order to compare both groups. Results show that there are some clear differences between native speakers and heritage speakers: the accuracy results were always lower for the SHS. However, in some of the structures the SHS matched the natives suggesting that incomplete acquisition is not the case since they are still able to comprehend these structures correctly. Attrition is a more plausible explanation, however, we see that not all areas are affected, since SHS were able to interpret 3 types of RC's correctly. The difficulty lays on the word-order structures and not on the comprehension of case in Relative Clauses. This is most likely due to the influence of their dominant language English.

References

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