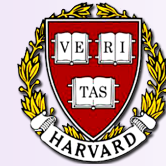# A Look at Heritage English

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Questions

1) Does Heritage English differ from "regular" native English?
2) If it is different, can the differing patterns be attributed to something besides transfer effect from the dominant language?
3) If so, is there a unified principle that can account for them?
4) Could such a principle be generalized for all heritage languages?

Background

- Heritage language (HL) is defined as the language spoken by people with ethno-linguistic affiliation to a language and some level of proficiency, but who have not had significant enough exposure because of the dominance of some other language (He 2010)
- Most of the research on HL thus far has taken place in America, so the focus has been on minority languages, e.g., Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and Korean
- Data on Heritage English remains scarce
- Most HL studies have so far focused on adults and, in a few cases, on very young children (under 5-6)

Procedure

- Interviewed 15 Hebrew-dominant English speakers, ages 7-14
- This age range is important for two reasons:
  1) Allows the documentation of their speech before they have received extensive English education in school (English is a semi-official language in Israel)
  2) Allows us to determine whether the deficiencies in HL are present before the children have left their English-speaking homes
- Did not distinguish between sequential and simultaneous bilinguals
- The interviews were conducted in their homes in Israel over the course of two weeks and resulted in approximately 10 hours of audio recordings
- Each interview consisted of two main portions: a casual questionnaire and video narration
- As questionnaires are inherently subjective, production in these sections was less controlled but still helpful in formulating preliminary answers
- Video narration was controlled as each subject narrated the same videos

Video Synopsis

Below is the synopsis of one of the videos for the purpose of comparison with their production in the next section:

A wolf kicks a trash can and smokes a cigarette he finds inside. He is about to kick it again when he sees the police passing by and tips his hat to them, waiting until they pass to kick it again. A rabbit is watering her garden several stories up, and one drop falls on the wolf's nose, and the other on his cigarette, putting it out. The wolf decides the rabbit would make a tasty dinner, and steals a clothesline to climb up. The rabbit notices the rope and whimsically decides to cut it. The wolf falls right into the police car that happens to be passing by.

Abstract

Heritage English speakers aged 7-14 display errors in morphology and syntax, among other areas. Some errors – for instance, word order errors – can be accounted for by transfer from the dominant language. A second category of errors parallels what can be found in the course of general linguistic development of monolinguals, though at a later stage; such errors include hypercorrection, regularization and overmarking. Finally, there are errors which do not belong to either category, such as reanalysis of particle verbs, where the speakers insert unallowable material between the verb and particle. Furthermore, Heritage English speakers seem to have difficulties planning complex constituents and embedding, and compensate by using resumptive pronouns. Errors that cannot be attributed to transfer from the dominant language are expected to appear in other studies of HLs as well. If typical HL features can be found across languages, and if these similarities can be shown to have analogs in general linguistic development and/or L2 attrition, we can increase our understanding of the human capacity to maintain and acquire language. This can, in turn, have ramifications for strategies in language education for both L2 and heritage speaker populations.

Data

Narrative

1 *Subject 1* (age 12): Um, there was this { } wolf or something, I don't know what it was, uh, he kicked a pot and stuff came out, and then there was a cigarette and he smoked it, while **kicking-like walking** and kicking the pot, **{?}** and then he saw a rabbit… **up**, like, in the building, so he climbed a thick rope and, the rabbit cut the rope, and he fell.
Interviewer: Did you notice how he realized the rabbit was up there?
Subject 1: Uh, yeah, because, um, was smoking the cigarette and then, **the, the- w- sh- um,** the rabbit was, like, she was watering her plants, and then, two drops fell on his cigarette.

2 *Subject 2* (age 8): **He wante- he go- he took from zeh garbage a cigarætte,** and, and zen he saw zeh police, said hello, and zen **he, just, em, just, eh … just frew** zeh garbage **can- can,** zen, eh, **zeh rab- rabbit,** em, how it's called … flowered his flowers, and zen he wanted to eat him, so he took a rope and went up, **an- and zeh rabbit saw him,** uh- and he was wif scissors, so **he cut ze- cut zeh rope,** and zen he fell into **zeh police…'s car.**"
Interviewer: "So how did he notice the rabbit in the first place?"
Subject 2: "Because eh, **zeh rabbit wan- eh, wer- because he flowered zeh, his flowers,** uh, **one, on- two drops** went on him."
Interviewer: "So where did the drops go?"
Subject 2: "One on his cigarætte, and **zeh, zeh fire,** eh…not burned…blew out? And one on his nose."

3 *Subject 3* (age 10): Eh, ah, i don't know **what is it**.
Interviewer: It was a wolf.
Subject 3: Wolf? **He, he, he** broke a, i don't know, *kufsa*.
Interviewer: A box.
Subject 3: A box, and then he took a cigarette, and **he- he** went, and he saw another box, and then something fell on him, and he looked, and, **s- and a, and a,** *akhbar*, **not an** *akhbar*, a, i don't know how to say it."
Interviewer: A rabbit?
Subject 3: Yeah a **rabbit, so he** gave **fo- for his**, for his um, for his, i don't know, *prachim*?"
Interviewer: Flowers.
Subject 3: Flowers, he gave them water, and and, **it- the water** fell **on, on** this […] wolf, and then he took a […] *chut* from all the clothes, he took off the clothes, and **he wen- he went, he, he, he throw it,** and then he went on the *chut*, and he came, he, and eh, and eh, and i don't know, **the rabbit, he tooked** his scissors, and he cut this, the *chut*, and then the, **this w- this wolf,** he fell on the *mishtara* […]

Casual

"[It] just leaved him a scar"
"He almost catched him"
"My mom teached it"
"Then two birds fle- fle- fly away? […] flied away"
"When he camed"
"We dresseded in clothes"
"he ran without Tweety out" (cf "he ran out without Tweety)
"there is stuff that I go with [them] out" (cf "go out with [them]")

Discussion

1) Transfer: speakers are incorporating Hebrew structures, words and idioms into their speech; structural evidence comes from patterns such as the placement of adverbs and PPs after the verb and before the object, e.g., "took [PP from the garbage] [DP a cigarette]" (see Shlonsky 1997 on Hebrew word order)

2) Fossilized L1 errors: HL speakers replicate the errors typical of early L1 acquisition, e.g., regularization ("leaved", "catched"), hypercorrection ("camed", "tooked his scissors"), and morphological overmarking ("dresseded"). The persistence of these errors in pre-teen and teenage speakers suggests that they require a significantly higher level of input to correct.

3) Reanalysis of particle verbs: Speakers syntactically reanalyze particles on particle verbs as regular adverbs, e.g., "he ran without Tweety out"; the speaker seems to re-analyze "out" as a regular adverb like "outside"; the placement of the adverb is consistent with general principles of English adverbial placement and Hebrew word-ordering principles.

4) Pronoun resumption: HL speakers use extensive pronoun resumption in matrix and embedded clauses.
 - In matrix clauses, the subject is stated, but after a short pause the appropriate pronoun is repeated before the verb ("Boaz, **he**'s the only boy").
 - In embedded clauses, speakers use a pronoun to refer to the antecedent ("I have a friend that **she** wants me to speak English").
 This strategy is common to a number of heritage languages (Polinsky 1995, 2007); it may serve to minimize the domain of the clause in favor of structural simplicity and/or to compensate for the minimal verb inflection in English by directly associating the verb with a pronoun.

5) Access difficulties: HL speakers have trouble with both lexical and structural access, as demonstrated by their patterns of disfluencies.
 - lexical access: in attempting to produce the desired word, a HL speaker may use various delaying strategies (pauses, filler words, e.g. "uh", "um", "how it's called") or attempt to restart the word ("garbage can- can", "rab- rabbit", "he wante- he go- he took")
 - structural access: when narrating, the speakers tend to produce clauses with minimal complexity, and string together these clauses with "and" and "then"; this results in a relatively flat structure.

Only a portion of errors can be attributed to transfer from the dominant language; although the motivation for certain patterns remains to be determined, the characteristics of Israeli Heritage English include reduced complexity, difficulties in accessing both lexical and structural components, over-regularization, and fossilized L1 errors (which seem to be due to insufficient primary linguistic input).

Conclusions

1) Heritage English differs noticeably from baseline native English.
2) These differences have their roots in phenomena besides transfer from the dominant language.
3) Although some consistent patterns have been identified, there is not yet a unified explanation for them.
4) Nevertheless, Heritage English displays characteristic properties of other HL: lack of recursion, pronoun resumption, and over-regularization.

Future Research

1) The narratives produced by HL speakers should be compared to the speech of monolingual age-matched peers to determine whether these speakers differ from the baseline (e.g., in the prevalence of flat structure noted for HLs).
2) Assuming that the scarce recursive structure shown here is a side effect of production, the knowledge of recursion should be tested in HL comprehension; e.g. judgments on complex ambiguous phrases such as "Mary$_i$ saw John$_j$ yesterday drunk$_{i/j}$" or reversible actions such as "Show me the giraffe that the elephant is pushing".
3) Some speakers have produced particle verbs separated significantly from their particle. A judgment task should be constructed to investigate the acceptability of the separation of a particle verb from its (obligatory) particle.
4) The conspicuous resumption of pronouns may reflect a breaking down of structure, an attempt at enriching English morphology, or a sign of divergent grammar (e.g., without syntactic movement). These options should be tested experimentally.
5) There is a need for research on Heritage English with dominant language other than Hebrew (e.g. Japan, China, Germany), to determine whether similar speech patterns occur and to identify areas of possible transfer.

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Thank you to Prof. Loraine Obler, Prof. Michael Becker, Omer Preminger and Prof. Tom Wasow.