A Look at Heritage English

Heritage English speakers aged 7-14 display errors in morphology and syntax, among other areas. Some errors—e.g., 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 overgeneralization. Finally, there are errors which do not belong to either of these domains. These errors are inserted unallowable material between the verb and particle. Furthermore, Heritage English speakers seem to have difficulties planning complex constituents and embedding, and compensate by using remounting strategies. Errors that cannot be attributed to transfer from the dominant language for other studies of HLs are 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 of education for both L2 and heritage speaker populations.

Abstract

Heritage English speakers aged 7-14 display errors in morphology and syntax, among other areas. Some errors—e.g., 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 overgeneralization. Finally, there are errors which do not belong to either of these domains. These errors are inserted unallowable material between the verb and particle. Furthermore, Heritage English speakers seem to have difficulties planning complex constituents and embedding, and compensate by using remounting strategies. Errors that cannot be attributed to transfer from the dominant language for other studies of HLs are 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 of education for both L2 and heritage speaker populations.

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) Are there any unidentified 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 ethnolinguistic 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-dominated English speakers, ages 7-14.
- The interviews are important for two reasons:
  1) Allows the documentation of their speech behavior.
  2) Provides data for extending English education in school (English is a semi-official language in Israel).
- 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 parts: a casual questionnaire and video narration.
- As questionnaires are inherently subjective, production in the tape sections was less controlled but still helpful in formulating preliminary answers.
- Video narration was controlled as each subject narrated the same videos.

Data

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 prepositions after the verb and before the object, e.g., “He, he, he, he, go home”, “He, he, he, he, smoke a cigarette”, “He, he, he, he, go” (cf. Shlonsky 1997 on Hebrew word order).
2) Fossilization of L1 errors: HL speakers replicate the errors typical of early L1 acquisition, e.g., regularization (“lefted”, “caught”), hypercorrection (“camed”, “tooked his scissors”), and morphological overmarking (“dresseded”). The persistence of these errors in pre-teen and teenage speakers suggest 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, he, he, go without Twenty out” (cf. “go out without Twenty”)

Discussion

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References


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, saw John, yesterday drunk”, 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 grammatical (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.