Restructuring in Heritage Grammars

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GLOW 40, Heritage Language Workshop
Leiden, Netherlands

March 14, 2017
Heritage speakers – simultaneous or sequential bilinguals whose L1 (the language spoken at home) becomes the non-dominant language, whereas the L2 (language spoken in the community) becomes the dominant language.
Introduction

It is well documented that heritage speakers differ in proficiency in the L1 from (monolingual) baseline speakers of the language.
Introduction

- **Phonology:** differences in pronunciation and prosody (Barlow 2014; Chang 2016; Godson 2003)

- **Morphology:** difficulties with using correct gender and number agreement, tendency to eliminate irregular forms (Benmamoun et al., 2013a, 2013b), overproduction of preterite morphology (Cuza et al. 2013)
Introduction

- **Semantics:** lack of quantifier scope ambiguities (Scontras et al. 2016)
- **Syntax:** tendency to impose strict word order (Isurin & Ivanova-Sullivan, 2008; Ivanova-Sullivan, 2014), difficulties with non-subject relative clauses (Polinsky 2011), lower use of pro-drop (Tsimpli et al. 2004)
Introduction

Zooming in on Morphology
Heritage speakers have difficulties with $\phi$-feature agreement (Håkansson 1995, Montrul et al. 2008, Polinsky 2008b, a.o.).

Many instances of observed differences between baseline and heritage speakers can be understood as tied to processing:

- Heritage speakers have the same knowledge of the grammar.
- But their usage of it differs due to the overwhelming load of speaking a non-dominant language.

Are difficulties with $\phi$-feature agreement also caused by processing difficulties?
Introduction

Broader Question

Are differences in behavior that we observe the result of...

1. overwhelming processing load of speaking non-dominant language?
2. deeper structural differences in the heritage grammar?
Goals of this presentation

- To examine **number and gender agreement** in heritage Spanish as a case study.
- To demonstrate that the syntax of number and gender in the heritage grammar of Spanish is indeed different from that of the baseline grammar – an instance of “**divergent grammar**”.
- To develop, based on the above, the hypothesis that the **erosion of agreement** in heritage grammars is undergirded by the **systematic reorganization** of the syntactic representation heritage grammars.
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Introduction

Case study: $\phi$-feature agreement in Spanish

Relevant features:
- Number
- Gender
Spanish number and gender

Spanish **number** is much like in English:

- **Plural** is marked with `-s`.
- **Singular** is indicated through lack of overt number suffix.
Spanish has two grammatical genders: masculine and feminine

- **Masculine** nouns typically have the word marker -o.
- **Feminine** nouns typically have the word marker -a.

  ▶ There are many exceptions to these general rules (Harris 1991).
  ▶ Distribution of masculine and feminine is roughly equal (Bull 1965).

This presentation deals only with inanimate/grammatical gender (human and lexical gender may be located in different positions from each other; see Kramer 2015, Matushansky 2013 for discussion).
Spanish number and gender

Agreement

Nouns are obligatorily marked for number and gender.

(1) a. *la manzana* ‘the apple (fem.)’
    b. *las manzanas* ‘the apples (fem.)’

Modifiers (as well as determiners and anaphors) must agree with the head noun in number and gender.

(2) a. *las manzanas rojas* ‘the red apples (fem.)’
    b. *los libros rojos* ‘the red books (masc.)’
In the syntactic representation of the baseline grammar, **number and gender are split**: the two features are projected (and therefore valued) independently (Fuchs et al. 2015; Antón-Méndez, Nicol & Garrett 2002; Carminati 2005; Picallo 1991):

(3) 
```
DP 
  /\ 
 NumP 
 /  \ 
{Num} GenP 
   /  \ 
  {Gen} NP 
```
A theoretical structural alternative is for number and gender to be **bundled** on the same projection (cf. Carstens 2000, 2003; Ritter 1993):

(4) **Split:**

```
DP
   NumP
      {Num}
      GenP
      {Gen}
      NP
```

(5) **Bundled:**

```
DP
   NumP
      {Num,Gen}
      NP
```
Are there differences between baseline and heritage Spanish in $\phi$-feature agreement (number and gender)?
**Research question:** Are difficulties with $\phi$-feature agreement due to the processing load of speaking a non-dominant language?

Predictions:

- (Null hypothesis) **Yes** $\rightarrow$ number and gender in the heritage grammar will also be split (as we will show for baseline grammar in a few slides).

- (Alternative hypothesis) **No** $\rightarrow$ number and gender in the heritage grammar will be structured differently (i.e. bundled).
**Procedure:** Replicate methodology from Fuchs et al. 2015 experimental study using agreement attraction in order to allow for direct comparison between baseline and heritage speakers.
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Agreement attraction

In order to determine whether two features are split or bundled, we put the categories into conflict with each other and study them in a comprehension experiment.

**Phenomenon**: Agreement attraction
Agreement attraction

Agreement attraction:
Ungrammatical condition in which a *predicate* incorrectly enters into agreement with a *local noun* rather than the *head noun* (Bock & Eberhard 1993; Bock & Miller 1991).

(6) *The key to the cabinets *were* lost.

(7) *Este libro sobre las guerras *son* muy interesantes.

*‘This book about the wars are very interesting.’*
Key idea

If number and gender are **split**, then there are **two independent processes of feature valuation**; agreement attraction in one feature need not entail agreement attraction in the other feature.

If number and gender are **bundled**, then there is a **singular process of feature valuation**; agreement attraction in one feature should entail agreement attraction in the other feature.
Experimental design

Stimuli

We created frame using **small clauses** that include head noun, local noun, and predicate.

(8) (SUBJ) VERB NP1 PREP NP2 ADVERB ADJ...

- This syntactic frame allows for increased distance between the relevant constituent and increased complexity, allowing us to tax the agreement mechanism.
- Our small clauses excluded depictive constructions.
Syntax of small clauses

Spanish: Contreras 1987, 1995 and Jiménez-Fernández & Spyropoulos
2013; beyond Spanish: Cardinalez & Guasti 1995; Basilico 2003; Progovac
2006; Citko 2011, a.o.
In grammatical examples, *predicate* must agree with *head noun* in features:

(9) Los estudiantes dejaron el cuaderno
    en la estantería cuidadosamente cerrado.
    on the.F.SG desk.F.SG carefully closed.M.SG
    ‘The students left the notebook carefully closed on the desk.’
Experimental design

By manipulating the number and gender of the head noun, local noun, and predicate, created ungrammatical conditions with one or two agreement attraction errors.
Experimental design

Agreement attraction in one feature: F-SG F-PL F-PL

(10) *Los estudiantes dejaron la libreta
    the.M.PL student.M.PL leave.PST.3PL the.F.SG notebook.F.SG
    en las estanterías cuidadosamente cerradas.
    on the.F.PL desk.F.PL carefully closed.F.PL
    ‘The students left the notebook carefully closed on the desk.’
Experimental design

Agreement attraction in **two** feature: F-SG M-PL M-PL

(11) *Los estudiantes dejaron la libreta
the.M.PL student.M.PL leave.PST.3PL the.F.SG notebook.F.SG
en los escritorios cuidadosamente cerrados.
‘The students left the notebook carefully closed on the desk.’
Experimental design

Prediction 1

If number and gender are split, then there are two independent processes of feature valuation; agreement attraction in one feature need not entail agreement attraction in the other feature.

→ Conditions with agreement attraction in two features are rated lower than agreement attraction in one feature.
Prediction 2

If number and gender are *bundled*, then there is a *singular process of feature valuation*; agreement attraction in one feature should entail agreement attraction in the other feature.

→ Conditions with agreement attraction in two features are rated same as conditions with agreement attraction in one feature.
Participants:

- 160 participants were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk.
- Instructions were given in Spanish.
- Experiment was preceded by a demographics questionnaire.
- Restricted IP addresses to the US in order to target heritage speakers of Latin American dialects of Spanish.
71 participants were identified as heritage speakers on the basis of the following criteria:

- Grew up speaking Spanish.
- Now speak mostly English.
- Have not lived in a Spanish-speaking country after the age of 8.
Grammatical stimuli were recorded by a speaker of Colombian Spanish.

Ungrammatical stimuli were created by splicing parts of grammatical stimuli (in order to avoid cues to ungrammaticality).

Each stimulus was presented auditorily (heritage speakers show slower reading times).

Participants were asked to rate each item on a scale from 1 (completamente inaceptable ‘completely unacceptable’) to 5 (completamente aceptable ‘completely acceptable’).
Results

Baseline Spanish results (Fuchs et al. 2015)
Results

Baseline Spanish results (Fuchs et al. 2015)

Conditions with agreement attraction in one feature
(F-SG F-PL F-PL; M-SG M-PL M-PL)
Results

Baseline Spanish results (Fuchs et al. 2015)

Conditions with agreement attraction in two features (F-SG M-PL M-PL; M-SG F-PL F-PL)
Baseline Spanish results (Fuchs et al. 2015)

Significant difference between F-SG F-PL F-PL vs F-SG M-PL M-PL.
→ baseline grammar has split number and gender.
New results for heritage speakers of Spanish:
Results

New results for heritage speakers of Spanish:

Conditions with agreement attraction in one feature
(F-SG F-PL F-PL; M-SG M-PL M-PL)
Results

New results for heritage speakers of Spanish:

Conditions with agreement attraction in **two** features
(F-SG M-PL M-SG; M-SG F-PL F-PL)
New results for heritage speakers of Spanish:

No significant difference between agreement attraction in one feature and two features.
Results

Side-by-side comparison

Baseline (split)

Heritage (bundled)
Alternative hypotheses

**Alternative explanation 1:** Heritage speakers are not sensitive to morphology.

**Alternative explanation 2:** Heritage speakers are only accessing number, not gender, as they process the sentence.

Under these alternatives, our results say nothing about mental representation of number and gender, only provide additional evidence for the well-documented insensitivity of heritage speakers to inflectional morphology.
Alternative hypotheses

These alternative hypotheses predict no sensitivity to gender differences, but we already saw that this is not the case:

This suggests heritage speakers are indeed sensitive to gender, so our results are reflective of a bundled representation of number and gender in the heritage grammar.
Research question: Are difficulties with $\phi$-feature agreement due to the processing load of speaking a non-dominant language?

- (Null hypothesis) Yes $\rightarrow$ number and gender in the heritage grammar will also be split.
- (Alternative hypothesis) No $\rightarrow$ number and gender in the heritage grammar will be structured differently (i.e. bundled).
Restructuring

**Research question:** Are difficulties with $\phi$-feature agreement due to the processing load of speaking a non-dominant language?

- (Null hypothesis) **Yes** → number and gender in the heritage grammar will also be split.
- (Alternative hypothesis) **No** → number and gender in the heritage grammar will be structured differently (i.e. bundled).
Restructuring

The heritage grammar bundles number and gender, so it has restructured the baseline grammar.

(12) **Split (baseline):**

```
DP
   /\       →
  /   \    
NumP   GenP
     /\    
{Num}  {Gen}  NP
```

(13) **Bundled (heritage):**

```
DP
   /\       
  /   \    
NumP   GenP
     /\    
{Num,Gen}  NP
```

**Key question**

How did we get from (12) to (13)?
Implications

The results suggest a possible trajectory for attrition of agreement in heritage grammar as the result of systematic pressures from the syntax.

- Bundling of two features is possible because they are on adjacent projections in the syntactic representation.
Implications

**Step 1**: Baseline grammar

(14) DP
    NumP
    {Num}  GenP
    {Gen}  NP

**Step 2**: Restructuring/bundling

(15) DP
    NumP
    {Num,Gen}  NP
Implications

Step 3: Feature bundle is **opaque**, which may lead to interpretive instability.

... If there is no consistent interpretation of a feature (bundle), it loses its utility...

Step 4: Feature specification of the bundle may be **lost altogether**, resulting in an empty feature projection → This results in a more **general decline in morphological richness**, leading eventually to the attrition of agreement.
Conclusions

Broader Question
Are differences in performance the result of...
1. ...overwhelming processing load of speaking non-dominant language?
2. ...deeper structural differences in the heritage grammar?
In the case of restructuring of agreement in heritage Spanish, the difference is due to structural difference in how number and gender features are projected.

In fact, the trajectory we put forth suggests that the gradual impoverishment of morphological richness is driven by systematic pressures which can be predicted on the basis of syntactic structures.
Future directions:

Heritage grammars are the outcome of language contact between L1 and L2. We can extend our paradigm to cases of agreement attrition in other instances of language contact, such as creoles.
Thank you!

This work was supported in part by funding from the Observatorio Cervantes at Harvard and NSF grants BCS-1619857 and BCS-1563129 to Maria Polinsky. We are grateful to Marcel den Dikken and audiences at MIT and CUNY-29 for helpful comments; we are solely responsible for any errors or omissions.
Appendix: Demographics

Age distribution of 71 participants whose data was analyzed and presented in the study:

![Histogram showing age distribution](image)

Fig. B.1: Age. ¿Cuántos años tiene? (por favor ponga el número)
Appendix: Demographics

Self-reported proficiency levels of 71 participants whose data was analyzed and presented in the study:

![Graph showing proficiency levels with categories: basic, intermediate, fluent, native]

Fig. B.2: Proficiency. ¿Cómo evaluaría su nivel de proficiencia en español?¹²

Note: self-assessment by heritage speakers is sometimes inversely correlated with their proficiency (cf. Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005; Thompson, 2015, for Spanish heritage speakers, Davidson & Lekic, 2013; Titus, 2012, for Russian heritage speakers) or reflects the degree of their ethnic and cultural identification rather than proficiency (Kang & Kim, 2012).
Appendix: Demographics

Language spoken at home, as reported by the 71 participants whose data was analyzed and presented in the study:

![Bar chart showing language spoken with family]

**Fig. B.3:** Home language. ¿Qué idioma habla con su familia?
Appendix: Demographics

Years of second-language education in Spanish at the elementary school level for the 71 participants whose data was analyzed and presented in the study:

![Bar chart showing years of second-language education in Spanish at the elementary school level](chart)

Fig. B.4: Grade-school Spanish. Si tomó usted clases de español en la escuela, ¿cuántos años de español tomó?
Appendix: Demographics

Amount of college-level coursework in second-language education in Spanish of the 71 participants whose data was analyzed and presented in the study:

![Bar chart showing distribution of college Spanish coursework](image)

Fig. B.5: College Spanish. *Si tomó clases de español en la universidad, ¿cuántos semestres ha tomado?*