

The Multilingual Mind: lecture series on multilingualism across disciplines

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The acquisition of the morphosyntax of Heritage Romanian in a dominant French setting

Abstract

The speakers of a Heritage Language (HL) are bilinguals who learnt a language in their family, but this language is not the majority language of their society. (Montrul, 2016; Polinsky, 2018). One often assumes that in this situation we deal with an unbalanced bilingualism, in which the HL suffers a delay in acquisition, or might be incompletely acquired, and some structures may undergo attrition. Most of the time, Heritage Speakers (HS) participating in the studies are adults from the first or the second generation of immigrants, which leaves uninvestigated the early phase of the acquisition of these languages and does not allow to identify possible differences and correlations between the early linguistic development and what happens after the young HS begin schooling in the dominant language.

In this talk, we will present the first results of a pilot study on the acquisition of Heritage Romanian (HR) by children of Romanian immigrants in France (Parisian surroundings). Our goal is to identify some possible differences between the structures which are vulnerable in the acquisition of HR before schooling (age 5-7) and after the beginning of schooling in French (age 8-12), and we collected data from two relevant age groups. We try to answer three questions: (i) can we identify an unbalanced bilingualism in the early acquisition process? (ii) what structures are vulnerable? (iii) is there any difference between these structures in the two groups?

Our data come from the first corpus of “frog stories” recorded in HR in France (37 stories collected till now). The children follow a Romanian course in the north surroundings of Paris. We compare the HR of these children to the baseline and to monolingual children from mainland.

Our results indicate a difference between HS of Romanian in the younger group and those who have already began schooling in French. Only the latter exhibit an unbalanced bilingualism. The vulnerable structures are, in the case of 5-7 years olds, the same as in monolingual acquisition. Older bilinguals, in turn, show the impact of the dominant language (transfer) in these structures, more precisely properties situated at the interface of syntax and discourse, syntax and morphology, and structures with a complex syntactic derivation. Here, we will investigate in particular relative clauses and Differential Object Marking.