

Structural optionality in heritage speakers' narratives

Bilinguals are dissimilar from monolinguals in many ways: they perform differently on vocabulary tests (Bialystok, Luk, Peets & Yang 2010), may have more difficulty with lexical retrieval (Sadat, Martin, Alario & Costa 2012) and may master certain morphosyntactic phenomena later than monolinguals (Nicoladis, Song & Marentette 2012). Another potential source of difference could be the way bilinguals approach structural optionality, which can be defined as the coexistence of two structural variants of a common underlying proposition (Papp 2000). If two syntactic options are available, do bilinguals use them similarly to monolinguals? In this project, we look at optionality involving clausal structure. We consider narrations where one and the same event can be expressed in various ways (with no or minimal changes in meaning): (1) several independent main clauses, (2) compound sentence with several coordinated clauses, or (3) complex sentence with a main clause and subordinate clause(s).

(1) A woman took her groceries out of her car too quickly. They fell on the ground.

(2) A woman took her groceries out of her car too quickly, and they fell on the ground.

(3) Because a woman took her groceries out of her car too quickly, they fell on the ground.

This type of structural optionality in bilinguals has not been thoroughly addressed in the literature. Sanchez Abchi & de Mier (2017) showed that child heritage speakers (HSs) of Spanish were able to tell stories with equal number of subordinate clauses as Spanish monolinguals. Since the authors only examined child narratives of HSs of Spanish and only in their heritage language, it remains unclear whether similar results would manifest themselves in other language pairs and in productions in the majority language of HSs.

In our contribution, we further explore sentence structure optionality in HSs' productions as a subpopulation of bilinguals. HSs are defined as individuals who are raised in homes where a language other than the country's majority language is spoken and who usually become more dominant in the majority language later in life (Polinsky 2018). We examine sentence structures in HSs' spoken and written narratives in their majority and heritage languages and compare them to monolingual speakers. We consider the following options: (1) main clauses, (2) coordinated clauses, (3) subordinate clauses (Neary-Sundquist 2017).

Our dataset comprises elicited narratives of 20 German HSs living in the USA, but not in a heritage language island community. HSs produced narratives in each of their two languages (German and English). In addition, we include narratives produced by 20 German monolinguals living in Germany and 20 English monolinguals living in the USA. The participants, who were 14-18 years old, saw a video of a car accident and described it in two settings (formal/informal) and two modes (spoken/written). Sentence types are assessed through two main measures: (1) number of terminable syntactic units (T-units) per narrative, and (2) syntactic complexity index (SCI), which is obtained by dividing the total number of subordinate clauses by the total number of T-units in a narrative. Moreover, we calculate average length of a T-unit in word tokens and average number of word tokens per narrative following Sanchez Abchi & de Mier (2017).

At this point, we have conducted a preliminary syntactic complexity analysis - so far only considering main and main plus subordinate clauses - based on a subset including 4 German HSs, 4 English monolinguals, and 4 German monolinguals. For English narratives, the preliminary results of the repeated measures ANOVA analysis showed no effect of group for bilingual majority vs. monolingual English speakers for the syntactic measures mentioned above.

As for German narratives produced by bilingual heritage vs. monolingual speakers of German, there was a group effect showing that HSs used slightly more T-units than monolinguals ($p=0.05$). In spite of the reduced number of T-units in heritage speakers, the SCI, the average length of a T-unit and the average number of tokens per narrative were the same for both speaker groups.

Based on the preliminary results, we tentatively argue that similar SCI values of German HSs and of monolingual English and German speakers indicate that HSs are able to use the same options as monolinguals to express the same propositions in both of their languages. It remains to be shown whether the same obtains once all our speakers are taken into account. Furthermore, in our full analysis, we will investigate the modes (spoken/written) and the settings (formal/informal) to see whether particular structural options are tied to specific contextual variables. If the findings warrant, we will also identify certain events typically described using one syntactic option by monolinguals in a given language (i.e., one of the three options listed earlier), and determine whether the HSs use the same option

or the alternative. In our talk, we will present the results of the full analysis of structural optionality in HSs' narratives and discuss their implications for HS bilingualism.

References:

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