

Attrition at interfaces: Null subjects in attrited and heritage Greek in Chile

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While more commonly spoken languages have featured prominently in heritage speakers (HS) and attrition research, still little is known on attrited Greek and Greek as a heritage language especially in Latin America. The aim of this study is to capture linguistic variation in the syntax of subjects of adult bi-/multi-lingual attriters and HS of Greek in the context of two typologically similar null subject (NS) languages: Greek and Chilean Spanish (ChSp). We focus on two of the properties of the NS parameter cluster in which differences between Greek and ChSp manifest themselves, namely: (a) the use of null and overt subjects in topic continuity and switch reference contexts; and (b) the use of pre/postverbal subjects in neutral and focused contexts.

Oral production data using two picture story description tasks (Hickmann 2003) were elicited from bilinguals (n=58): attriters, HS, heritage learners and ChSp L2 learners of Greek; as well as from monolingual Greek and ChSp controls (n=40). The data were collected between November 2015 and April 2016 in Chile and in Greece. Logistic regressions were used to determine the association of the groups of bilinguals and monolinguals with linguistic and sociolinguistic variables. Moreover, interpretation data were elicited on pronominal anaphora resolution.

Data from the ChSp and Greek monolingual groups showed that the two languages are not identical regarding subject distribution. In production, there are differences (i) in the use of null and overt subjects in topic continuity and topic shift contexts; and (ii) in the SV/VS order in unaccusative neutral contexts. In processing/interpretation, differences are found (iii) in the preferences in assigning antecedents to overt pronouns in anaphora resolution.

Subject-verb inversion in declarative sentences in both Spanish and Greek is constrained by principles operating at the syntactic-pragmatic interface (i.e. focus or non-focus) and at the lexico-syntactic interface (i.e. lexical verb class). On the one hand, according to the Interface Hypothesis, divergence found in overt/null subject distribution of bilinguals vis-à-vis monolinguals is because of the syntax-discourse interface nature of NS: the interpretable features are susceptible to attrition while the uninterpretable features are acquired in end-state L2 grammars. Overextension of the scope of overt subjects has in fact been shown to obtain even when a NS language comes in contact with another NS language (e.g. Sorace, Serratrice, Filiaci & Baldo 2009) and has been explained as the use of a 'default' unmarked form to mitigate processing cost whenever two languages are involved, regardless of the cross-linguistic overlap. On this basis, in our bilingual groups when compared to the monolinguals we expect to find (a) optionality as regards word order SV/VS in neutral and focused subject contexts; (b) overextension of overt subjects, both nominal and pronominal, in contexts of [-topic shift]. According to the Interpretability Hypothesis (Tsimplici & Mastropavlou 2007; Tsimplici & Dimitrakopoulou 2007), on the other, uninterpretable features are difficult to identify and analyse in the input. However, the prediction is similar with regards to (c) interpretable features, namely they will become underspecified due to attrition, possibly yielding (d) misuse of null subjects in contexts of topic shift (e.g. Montrul 2016).

The results of our study so far indicate a significant overextension of the scope of null subjects in topic shift contexts causing ambiguity in the bilingual performance as compared to monolinguals. The following is an example from our HS data:

- (1) (...) enas skilos_i ide_i ton gato_j ke iksere_i oti ithele_j
 (...) a dog.NOM saw.3SG the cat.ACC and knew.3SG that wanted.3SG
 na fai_j ta pulakia. Tote tu dagose_i
 PRT.MOD eat.PNP.3SG the little.birds.ACC then he.GEN bit.3SG
 tin ura ke to travikse_i ja na fi_j.
 the tail.ACC and him pulled.3SG for PRT.MOD leave.PNP.3SG
 ‘(...) a dog saw the cat and (he) knew that (he) wanted to eat the little birds.
 Then (he) bit his tail and (he) pulled him down so that (he) goes away.’

Moreover, in neutral contexts, bilinguals prefer the SV order with unaccusatives, manifesting a slight increase toward the preferred order of the contact language. Experiment results will be also obtained shortly on anaphora resolution.

On the basis of our data so far, we conclude that L1 attrition results in underspecification (a) regarding the interpretability of the [focus] associated with VS orders in unaccusatives thus yielding less variation than in monolinguals and essentially SV; and (b) of the deixis feature of the subject pronoun. If Spanish and Greek subject pronouns differ in the latter being more *id(eictic)* than the Spanish ones and if we subscribe to the view that *phi*-features on Infl reflect the pronominal system of the language (Koeneman 2006, Lehmann 2002, see also Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998) then it follows that the interpretable feature of [deixis] will become underspecified thus rendering the *phi*-features of the bilingual speakers similar to the Spanish ones; therefore, overall, it will give rise to overuse of NS.

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