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Title: The role of parental input in shaping the knowledge of case in Polish heritage speakers

Abstract:
Despite the consensus for the necessity of establishing the baseline language for heritage speakers (Polinsky & Kagan 2007) very few studies compare divergences between the speech of heritage speakers and the language of their parents. The present study offers new insights into nominal morphology in the Polish heritage language by showing interrelation between limited use of cases in heritage speakers and lower frequency of case use in the generation of their parents. Additionally the present paper argues that divergences observed in the use of the instrumental case by Polish heritage speakers can be - at least partially - attributed to their parents limited use of various functions of this case.

Conducted in Chicago the study investigates the case use and knowledge of 25 Polish heritage speakers 12 first-generation immigrants and a control group of 12 monolinguals from Poland. The study employed two tasks: story elicitation (based on a wordless picture book “Frog Where Are You?”) and elicited sentence completion. The results show that although all oblique cases are preserved in the speech of heritage speakers the frequency is proficiency dependent and significantly lower than in the other group of immigrants. On the other hand the first-generation immigrants also displayed lower frequency of the case use as compared to the control group. Moreover there was a significant difference between the groups in the mean of oblique case distribution per clause with first-generation immigrants displaying lower use than monolinguals. The difference was especially evident in the frequency of the accusative and instrumental. A qualitative analysis indicated that first-generation immigrants used instrumental in fewer functions than did the monolinguals. The figurative uses of this case as well as the instrumental of means considered one of the main types of this case occurred infrequently in the data from first-generation immigrants. On the other hand the knowledge of instrumental although slightly more robust in the language of advanced heritage speakers in the speech of lower proficiency heritage speakers was restricted to its one function related to the preposition z “with”. Just as in the speech of first-generation immigrants the instrumental of means was not used by heritage speakers spontaneously.

The above findings suggest that there exists a correlation between heritage speakers’ limited use of cases and first-generation immigrants’ limited frequency of case. The use of only one function of the instrumental case by heritage speakers corresponds with the occurrence of this case only in adpositions in the speech of the generation of their parents. The above results show that the language of first-generation immigrants underwent changes in regard to case use. Although their knowledge of cases and underlying system seemed to remain intact first-generation immigrants used them significantly less frequent than did the controls. Given the fact that heritage speakers have access to constrained heritage language input which is typically restricted to the interactions with parents the present paper argues that divergent case
use of heritage speakers is related to observed lower case frequency in first-generation immigrants.