

The Importance of Input: A Case Study of Heritage Speakers' Parents

A comprehensive description of heritage grammars with attention to deviation from home-country equivalents necessitates investigation of heritage speakers' input (e.g. Isurin and Ivanova-Sullivan 2008). Questions of incomplete acquisition vs. contact-induced change cannot begin to be addressed without it. Studies of heritage Russian speakers (e.g. Dubinina & Polinsky 2013a) frequently characterize those speakers as incomplete Standard Russian acquirers. However, if similar pragmatic and structural changes were to be found in heritage speakers' parents' Russian, doubt would be cast on the characterization of the Russian of the children as simply the result of incomplete acquisition of a native Standard (e.g. Laleko, 2014).

The author's previous study (2014) found that the Russian spoken by two 22-year-old bilinguals—children of immigrants from the former USSR—deviated from the home-country norm (MSR) primarily through “pragmatic transfer,” or widening of contexts of use for particular Russian constructions on analogy to perceived parallel structures in English.

The current study investigates the Russian spoken by the parents of two subjects of the investigator's previous case study of heritage Russian in Minnesota, endeavoring to isolate those elements of their Russian that may have been acquired or developed under influence from changes occurring in the Russian speech of their parents.

The results demonstrate that despite conscious efforts—characteristic to Fifth-Wave immigrants (e.g. Dubinina and Polinsky 2013b)—not to assimilate into American culture, the parents' speech demonstrates evidence of contact-induced changes at the less-salient level of structure. Importantly, the primary patterns of language change found in the participants' speech are less pronounced versions of the “pragmatic transfer” observed in the speech of their children. These patterns are (from the perspective of Modern Standard Russian): 1) A reduction in pro-drop 2) a reduction in non SVO-word order, and 3) a reduction in impersonal and existential constructions. As is the case for their children, the types of contact-induced changes found in their speech largely reflect generalization of parallel English/Russian structures.

The study suggests that the patterns in the speech of the two heritage speakers in the previous study cannot easily be described as a result of incomplete acquisition of native Modern Standard Russian, and demonstrates the importance of careful consideration of heritage language input.

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