The case for contact induced-change in Heritage Languages

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Polinsky and Scontras (Polinsky & Scontras, 2019) study the development of language competence under unbalanced bilingualism, resulting in ‘heritage languages’. They focus on “quantity and quality of the input from which the heritage grammar is acquired, and the economy of online resources when operating in a less dominant language." This commentary addresses the (in my view) rather superficial treatment of the role of transfer in heritage languages in an otherwise very thoughtful programmatic paper. This is what the authors write:

“Perhaps the most obvious culprit is transfer from the dominant language, whereby lexical or grammatical features of the dominant language bleed into the heritage language grammar so that the heritage language begins to resemble the dominant language. Transfer at the level of individual lexical items or, more generally, lexical semantics is rather well-attested. Although conceptually appealing, empirical evidence for structural transfer can sometimes be hard to come by: we must be sure that the feature of interest is active in the dominant language grammar of the heritage speakers so that it can be present to transfer; as a result, investigations of transfer cannot focus solely on linguistic behavior in the heritage language…. As an example, consider the loss of English plural marking in English-Japanese bilinguals for whom Japanese is dominant…. Obligatory plural marking in noun phrases is absent in Japanese, so this dominant language could potentially be the source of transfer. However, the same loss of plural marking occurs in heritage English with dominant languages that mark nominal plural on a regular basis (e.g., French), so the role of transfer in this change is doubtful.”

As pointed out as early as 1947 by the Swedish Romanist Malmberg (Malmberg, 1947–48) for Andean Spanish, the transfer of the absence of a distinction (as is the case of the singular/plural distinction in English–Japanese bilinguals; the example of French is perhaps a bit besides the point since French nominal plural is hardly heard) is not the most convincing type. We need to find cases where the dominant language makes distinctions not present in the heritage language.

I will briefly present evidence from three recent doctoral dissertations on heritage languages that point to an important role for transfer. Şahin (2015) studied Papiamento and Turkish as heritage languages in the Netherlands. One study (Indefrey, Şahin & Gullberg, 2017) concerned the expression of static topological relations in heritage Turkish for two groups of speakers, Turkish-dominant and Dutch-dominant. In both bilingual groups, differences compared to monolingual speakers were observed. Dutch-dominant bilinguals showed enhanced congruence between translation-equivalent Turkish and Dutch topological relation markers. Turkish-dominant bilinguals extended the use of a topologically neutral locative marker. A second study (see also Kootstra and Şahin, 2018) focused on dative sentence production by Papiamento speakers in Aruba and in the Netherlands. Both groups of speakers were sensitive to a Dutch prime with a pattern not common in Papiamento in describing transfer events in Papiamento, but especially younger speakers in the Netherlands produced more Dutch-like dative structures. Papiamento syntactic preferences in the Netherlands are changing as a function of contact with Dutch.

Francesca Moro (2016) studied a number of constructions in Ambon Malay, a heritage language spoken in the Netherlands since 1948: nominal modification, aspect marking, ditransitives, and resultative constructions. Dutch influenced the heritage language in two ways: first of all, when Malay itself had two structural options, the option most similar to Dutch increased in frequency in the heritage language (see also Moro and Klamer, 2015). Second, there were cases of grammaticalization of Malay morphemes to match morpho-syntactic distinctions present in Dutch.

Finally, Villerius (2019) studied Javanese as a heritage language in the South-American former Dutch colony Surinam, where there has been a Javanese community since the 1870s. The Javanese migrants became bilingual first in Javanese and Sranantongo, and later on Dutch also became an important language in their repertoire. Topics focused on are locative constructions, multi-verb motion constructions, transfer events, and the expression grammatical voice (as it relates to focus). Villerius shows that Dutch and especially Sranantongo exerted a significant structural influence on heritage Javanese (see also Villerius, Moro & Klamer, to appear).

The three studies show that transfer indeed can play an important role. What do the studies tell us, and why do we find relatively little evidence for transfer in much US-based research on
heritage languages? What characterizes the groups studied by Şahin, Moro, and Villerius is a relatively high maintenance of the community language, and a period of active bilingual usage within the community spanning several generations. For Villerius the transfer effects were there for the whole speaker population, for Moro and for Şahin for high-contact speakers. Perhaps the groups studied in much of the research reported on by scholars like Polinsky and Scontras concern speakers that underwent a more rapid shift towards English, with a shorter period of intensive bilingual usage.

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**References**


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