

Semantic universals in the article choice of heritage speakers

One of the key issues investigated in language acquisition research is the role of input. Heritage language (HL) contexts where input is inherently reduced (and variable) provide ideal conditions to investigate this (Pires & Rothman 2009). Although most heritage speakers (HSs) may have the core syntax properties just like monolinguals, they often fall behind monolinguals in grammar areas where syntax interacts with morphology, semantics, discourse and pragmatics, and often become dominant in the majority language (L2) (Montrul 2016). The use of articles is a syntax-semantics interface phenomenon which requires not only the knowledge of mapping of morphosyntactic features onto phonological forms, but also the knowledge of semantic features involved in the article choice (Ionin et al. 2004). The aim of the present study is to investigate the extent to which HL (Turkish) is guided by semantic universals (i.e., definiteness, specificity and partitivity (presuppositionality)) and how HSs behave in the corresponding categories in their L2 (German). The focus of the investigation is the indefinite contexts. In Turkish, indefinite NPs can be bare (*a* +NP) and Accusative case marked (*a* +NP-Acc). While the Accusative case encodes specificity and partitivity, bare indefinites are ambiguous between specific/nonspecific and partitive/nonpartitive reading. In contrast, specificity and partitivity are not morphologically marked in German and indefiniteness is expressed by the presence of the indefinite article (which is inflected for gender, case and number) (von Stechow & Kornfilt 2005) (see the examples below). In the present study, HSs (n=35) are assessed in both of their languages via a sentence completion and an acceptability judgment task in addition to a standardized language proficiency test and a background questionnaire. Their findings will be compared to those of first generation Turkish immigrants in Germany and monolingual controls in Turkey as well as German native speaker at a later stage. This talk will report the preliminary findings from the HSs on their HL and L2 and the findings will be discussed in relation to recent generative linguistic theorizing (Alexiadou et al. 2007, Westergaard 2009) and usage-based approaches (Backus 2014, Tomasello 2003) in an attempt to contribute to the debate over the innateness and the role of experience in language acquisition.

References

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Specificity in Turkish and German

- [-definite, **+specific**] context: Nihan wants to buy a (certain) piano. Even though it is very expensive, she looks determined.

Nihan **bir piyano-yu** almak istiyor... Acc. Indefinite (a +NP-Acc)
Nihan will **ein** (bestimmtes) **Klavier** kaufen...

- [-definite, **-specific**] context: Nihan wants to buy a piano, though she hasn't decided which brand she should get yet.

Nihan **bir piyano** almak istiyor... Bare indefinite (a +NP)
Nihan will **ein Klavier** kaufen...

Partitivity in Turkish and German

- [+partitive] context: Jane went to a pet shop and saw two puppies and three kittens there. After some deliberation, she bought **a kitten/one of the kittens**.

(Jane) **bir kedi-yi** aldı. Acc. Indefinite (a +NP-Acc)
Sie hat **ein Kätzchen** gekauft. (einer der Kätzchen-overt partitive)

- [-partitive] context: Jane was walking down the street when she heard somebody whine. She looked down and was surprised to see **a kitten/#one of the kittens**.

(Jane) **bir kedi** gördü. Bare indefinite (a +NP)
Sie hat **ein Kätzchen** gesehen.