Native Speakerhood in Heritage Language Research

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Abstract. This chapter provides an overview of heritage language (HL) research in relation to native speakerhood. The variation across HL speakers who range from overhearers to highly proficient individuals often indistinguishable from native speakers (NSs) is one of the greatest challenges faced by the field. We suggest that, on sociolinguistic grounds, much remains to be said about the acquisition and awareness of sociolinguistic variants in the HL; speaker agency and identities; “passing” as native in terms of contextually-situated language performativity; the role of ideologies in HL settings; community engagement and service-learning, and L2-HL learner interactions in the classroom. From the perspective of grammatical systems, more work needs to be done to distinguish effects of processing difficulties or memory limitations from more profound innovations in HL grammars. We argue that despite their knowledge gaps, HL speakers have much in common with NSs, and with appropriate instruction and expanded social use of the language they attain levels of proficiency highly comparable to those of NSs. The rapidly growing field of HL research calls for a dialogue among our various sub-disciplines, recognizing our shared goal to understand language variation in HL populations, develop better and more consistent assessment methodologies, and formulate pedagogical practices from which HL learners will most benefit.

1. Introduction

As increasing numbers of heritage language (HL) speakers have begun to appear in high-school and college second-language (L2) classrooms, educators have faced a mounting challenge: should these students be considered “native” or not? Should they be separated from L2 learners? What are their linguistic strengths and weaknesses? What is the most effective approach to developing their knowledge and use of the language, and how should that approach differ from best pedagogical practices in L2 classrooms?

More than two decades of systematic research has now demonstrated that these questions have no easy answers, from theoretical, methodological, and practical pedagogical standpoints. Answers must nonetheless be sought, and Olga Kagan has been at the forefront of that quest. Under her leadership and direction, the National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC) at UCLA has served as the locus of advancement and dissemination of knowledge about HLs, and as a base for import-
ant outreach programs that foster the teaching and learning of those languages. The NHLRC has provided a point of intellectual and practical communion not only for those involved in HL curricular articulation and pedagogy, but also for a growing number of scholars engaged with questions of identifying and defining HL speakers (or learners, when they appear in educational settings), as well as understanding the nature of the grammatical and (socio-)linguistic repertoires that they present. Such institutional support has brought the field of HL acquisition into existence over the past two decades, seemingly as a complement, and sometimes a counterpart, to the field of second language acquisition (SLA). A vexing issue that the new field has been facing is whether HL speakers should be recognized as native speakers (NSs) or not.

To date, much of the research conducted on HL speakers has been framed within a comparative perspective, taking either the natively spoken language or L2 learner data as the point of departure. Among the broad objectives of such an approach are: 1) understanding the ontological nature of HL grammars through a differential lens, with the broader goal of relating HL phenomena to a more general theory of human language; 2) gauging empirically the extent to which HL repertoires are distinguishable from those of L2 and L1 speakers (and using the results for both epistemological and institutional purposes); and consequently, 3) interpreting the place of HL learners and users in classroom and workplace settings, thus devising and implementing methods that are appropriate and adequate for their training and success—in personal, social, and professional terms. In comparing NSs and HL speakers, it seems natural to emphasize differences, especially in the early stages of the development of the field to which Olga Kagan has contributed so significantly. As the field develops, there is a growing consensus that HL speakers are more similar to L1 speakers than to L2 learners, although similarities of lower-level HL speakers and intermediate-to-advanced-proficiency L2 speakers remain generally unexplored.

Olga Kagan and her colleagues have been at the forefront of advocacy for a macro approach in the teaching of HL and motivating other researchers to employ such an approach in the classroom (Carreira & Kagan, 2011; Colombi, 2009; Jegerski & Ponti, 2014; Potowski & Lynch, 2014; Valdés, 1995). As Carreira (2004) argued, the field must seek “explanatory adequacy” regarding the situation of HL learners, accounting for the place of the HL in the local community, the learner’s personal connection to the HL, and proficiency in the language. Although the latter criterion is the most restrictive or “narrow” (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007), it is likely the most relevant and practical in terms of HL teaching and research agendas. In this chapter,

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1 See Lynch (2003), Valdés (2005), Cantone, Müller, Schmitz, & Kupisch (2008) for a discussion of the relationship between these fields.

2 One must consider that advanced to superior or “near-native” L2 users enter into the theoretical construct of a “bilingual continuum” alongside highly proficient HL speakers (cf. Katz, 2003; Koike & Liskin-Gasparro, 1999; Mackey, 1968; Piller, 2002).
we offer some considerations on the notion of native speakerhood in HL research from the perspective of language competence or proficiency. Our main point is that despite their knowledge gaps, HL speakers have much in common with NSs, and with appropriate instruction and expanded social use of the language they attain levels of proficiency highly comparable to those of NSs. This leads us to re-examine the place of the HL speaker in linguistic theory, which for our present purposes encompasses formal linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and theories of applied linguistics.

2. Conceptualizing the Heritage Speaker in Linguistic Theory

Perhaps the greatest challenge for classroom teachers, researchers (both in and beyond laboratory settings), and workplace supervisors alike is the range of linguistic variation manifest in HL repertoires, i.e., the “bilingual continuum” (Mackey, 1968; Silva-Corvalán, 1994; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007). Just as with L2 speakers, HL speakers demonstrate a bewildering variance in their production—from very fluent, high-proficiency speakers who may be barely distinguishable from native monolinguals, to overhearers (Au, Knightly, Jun, & Oh, 2002) who may be unable to speak at all. Similarly, HL speakers vary in their comprehension abilities as well, an issue we will return to below. For most HL speakers, a general impression of “native-like” speech in terms of phonology (see the August, 2016 special issue of Heritage Language Journal) and discursive fluidity often belies “non-native-like” patterns in some aspects of grammar and the lexicon, particularly in the case of socially more restricted users of language. Even in those cases, however, HL speakers can be quite adept at circumlocution; rather than insisting upon a particular word, phrase, or verbal tense, they often deploy other lexical and discursive means to express themselves. Jourdain (2000) observed that near-native L2 speakers relied upon linguistic strategies similar to NSs’ in the act of circumlocution, e.g., describing, drawing analogies, and employing synonyms, and she noted that they also framed their message in similar ways to ensure the comprehension of their interlocutor. Highly-proficient HL speakers are likely similar to NSs in this regard as well. As HL vocabulary is generally more expansive than that of L2 learners, despite falling short of the lexical repertoire of the typical educated NS, they can get around problem areas in expressing themselves to a degree. Such lexical and discursive dexterity affords them much-needed confidence in language use, especially in community engagement and service-learning projects (DuBord & Kimball, 2016; Kim & Sohn, 2016; Martínez, 2010), and with L2 users and other HL bilinguals. For example, in a study of L2-HL classroom learner interactions in collaborative writing tasks, Henshaw (2015) found that HL learners resolved episodes related to lexical form in a target-like way more often than their L2 counterparts; on the other hand, the L2 learners resolved episodes regarding orthographic form more accurately. Henshaw concluded that task effects as well as learner char-
acteristics might serve to explain these differences, noting that HL speakers have a wider vocabulary (Fairclough, 2011) and a better command of early-acquired words than L2 learners (Montrul & Foote, 2012). In another task-based study at the intermediate level, Bowles, Adams and Toth (2014) observed that, in interactions between HL and L2 learners, the vast majority of “language-related episodes” were resolved by the HL learners in interaction with L2 classmates, and that L2 learners in general felt less confident about their knowledge of Spanish than their HL peers.

Typically, however, HL learner confidence erodes in interactions with NSs and in less familiar discursive repertoires. Formal and academic registers often pose substantial linguistic struggles for HL speakers/learners, especially in terms of complex syntax, abstract or hypothetical discourse, formal address, and specialized or professional linguistic codes, sometimes leading to perceived “breakdowns” in fluidity (Bermel & Kagan, 2000; Friedman & Kagan, 2008; Silva-Corvalán, 1994; Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998). In these dimensions of language use, HL speakers themselves may explicitly regard their own abilities as wanting, inadequate, or inappropriate (Callahan, 2010; MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2016; Lynch & Potowski, 2014; Potowski, 2002; Urciuoli, 2008). A stymied sense of self-confidence in the HL may lead some to shy away from contexts or opportunities to speak the language altogether (Abdi, 2011; Goble, 2016; Karapetian, this volume). Precisely for these reasons, some HL speakers are reluctant to characterize themselves as “native speakers” of the language, or even as “bilinguals” (Dressler, 2010; Lynch, 2008). As with the continuum of HL speakers themselves, researchers working on HLs range from those who emphasize their nativeness (Otheguy, 2016; Kupisch et al., 2014; Kupisch & Rothman, 2016; Pires & Rothman, 2009) to those who underscore the differences between NS and HL grammars (Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2013; Hulsen, 2000; Laleko, 2010; Lee, 2011; Montrul, 2008, 2016; Polinsky, 2006). The differences often have less to do with the general conception of HL and more with the emphasis placed by a particular researcher on salient properties of HLs (Montrul, 2016).

HL research must be viewed as an extension of research on NS competence or ability in general. In the early stages of modern linguistics (from Saussure to Chomsky and Labov), the intuitions and/or usage of monolingual speakers constituted the empirical basis for investigation and theory building. As disciplinary knowledge grew ever more sophisticated during the 20th century, new speaker populations were sought in order to expand theories and accounts of human language, often to test the existing prominent hypotheses of linguistic theory. These populations included child L1 acquirers, L2 learners, speakers of creole languages, and clinical subjects. Perhaps it is in the tradition of language contact studies established in the work of Weinreich (1953) that the “problem” of non-monolingual speakers was placed front and center in a theory of language variation and change. Even so, Weinreich’s line of analysis and argumentation was framed within the bounded notion of national languages and the continuity of multilingualism, specifically concerned
with the situation of French, German, Romansch and Italian speakers in Switzerland. Weinreich delineated three “types” of bilinguals: those who possessed a singular semantic system encompassing two languages (“compound bilinguals”); those who possessed two different semantic systems, each one corresponding to a respective language (“coordinate bilinguals”); and those who depended on the interpretation of words in a weaker language (L2) through concepts of a more dominant language (“sub-coordinate bilinguals”). These distinctions were drawn principally according to the context of acquisition and use of the languages in question; “compound bilingualism” was the result of learning and using two languages within a same context. This is likely the case of most HL speakers who have constituted the basis of research conducted to date.

Labov (1972) emphasized the centrality of the concept of speech community in a definition of language as a system, highlighting the uniformity and continuity of the system in social and intergenerational terms (in a theory of language change). Labov’s widely used framework for the study of language variation and change posited that “the speech community [is] an aggregate of speakers who share a set of norms for the interpretation of language, as reflected in their treatment of linguistic variables: patterns of social stratification, style shifting, and subjective evaluations. This orderly heterogeneity normally rests on a uniform structural base...” (1989, p. 2, emphasis added). The principle of uniformity of variable linguistic usage that Labov posited in his work suggests that within a given speech community, speakers will share the same linguistic rules and structural constraints determining rule application. In a sense, Labov did not venture too far beyond Saussure’s basic idea that language “exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community” (2000, p. 24) and “in the form of a sum of impressions deposited in the brain of each member of a community” (p. 25). A principal concern with Labov’s model is that it appears to buckle under the pressure of language contact situations. For example, in an extensive study of French-English bilinguals in Ontario, Mougeon and Nadasdi (1998) observed that a number of linguistic forms used invariably by “socially unrestricted,” i.e., French-dominant, bilinguals were sometimes absent in the speech of more socially restricted speakers, i.e., those who used the language less frequently and in fewer settings. Patterns of usage of vernacular features and stylistic variants were also importantly different across the two groups. The authors affirmed that these differences “constitute a solid body of empirical evidence that...in minority speech communities, [Labov’s] principle of uniformity of rules and constraints is often falsified” (Mougeon & Nadasdi, 1998, p. 50). This sociolinguistic phenomenon has important consequences not only for the status of minority languages at the local and institutional levels, but also for HL grammars and discursive repertoires.

In sum, the task of conceptualizing the HL speaker affords us the possibility of developing a much more complex and elaborate understanding of the nature of language. Linguistic theory has achieved a great deal of sophistication by exploring
language from the perspective of the idealized monolingual speaker (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3); most studies have relied upon data from monolingual, young, available, literate speakers, whom we can refer to as MYALs. By the same token, sub-disciplines of sociolinguistics such as variationism (Labov, 1972), pragmatics (Levinson, 1983), and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) have relied largely upon the situation of monolingual speakers in industrialized and highly literate societies to advance relevant theories and make conjectures regarding language change. The field of SLA has focused fundamentally on the same sort of population. Whether they be simultaneous or sequential bilinguals, HL speakers present fascinating possibilities for investigation for several reasons. First, they fulfill the age-of-acquisition criterion for “successful” learning of the language because they are typically exposed to the HL since birth, and many acquire and use the HL almost exclusively during early childhood. Second, they generally lack advanced literacy skills in the HL (or any HL literacy skills at all in the case of languages with different graphic conventions). And finally, they allow us to gain insight into the potential range of “native speakerhood” and the interface of bilingualism and L2 acquisition, since the HL becomes a secondary language beyond childhood, i.e., it is neither the language of schooling, nor the politically and culturally dominant language of broader society, nor the preferred language of interaction with same-age peers. These facts lead us to questions regarding the outcomes of HL acquisition and use.

It behooves us to ask the question of how common such MYALs are. They are clearly overrepresented in linguistic research and often in educational research as well. A useful comparison is with WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) societies in psychology (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Caution is needed to generalize from WEIRD populations, and likewise, language researchers may want to be less cavalier in addressing questions of language on the basis of data drawn from such a small and very specific sample of speakers.

Proponents of a ‘critical period’ or ‘fundamental difference hypothesis’ (Bley-Vroman, 2009) assert that the outcomes of language acquisition will be fundamentally different if the process begins after a certain age. However, there is little consensus regarding its constitution or the actual age that is biologically critical. Some scholars have proposed different critical periods for different language modules (phonology, syntax, semantics), with the apparent ‘cut-off’ age for syntax later than that for phonology. DeKeyser (2013) emphasizes that there is a wide range of conceptual and methodological approaches to the question of the critical period, and conclusions are based on highly disparate samples taken from limited strata of the population (i.e., mostly classroom L2 learners rather than immigrant populations or language contact settings). According to him, consensus regarding age effects is precluded by the lack of control of fundamental variables, similar instrumentation, and methodological procedures across studies.
3. The Outcomes of HL Acquisition and Use

Researchers have addressed two pertinent questions concerning HL speakers: 1) what is the trajectory of their HL acquisition or, to put it differently, what are the learning outcomes in adult HL speakers? 2) what factors may condition those outcomes? We will consider some specific differences between NS grammars and the grammars of HL speakers below in Section 4, but first we wish to underscore that these differences may be manifested in both the production and the comprehension of languages. Talking about these differences has presented a stumbling block of sorts in our burgeoning field, as some of the existing terms have appeared more adequate and appropriate than others. Surely the most polemical term has been “incomplete acquisition”.

Montrul (2011) noted that the connotation of the widely used term “incomplete acquisition” discomfits some researchers and practitioners, as incompleteness may imply deficiency (e.g., Pascual y Cabo & Rothman, 2012; Otheguy, 2016; Kupisch & Rothman, 2016). Montrul clarified:

[W]e can speak about heritage language grammars in general as having certain structural characteristics that differ from those of fully fluent bilinguals and monolinguals of the same variety. But these characteristics are most likely due to an interruption in the normal transmission of the language in childhood, rather than to exposure to a different language variety spoken by parents and siblings or their immediate network of heritage speakers (Montrul, 2011, pp. iii–iv)

Similar to Montrul, but with rather different terminology, Lynch (2013) suggested that the term “U.S. Spanish,” in the sense of a “native” variety beyond first-generation adult immigrants, is highly questionable for two main reasons: (i) a lack of community-based norms of usage owed fundamentally to the lack of generational continuity of Spanish in the U.S. (cf. Otheguy & Zentella, 2012); and (ii) readily apparent patterns of sociolinguistic discontinuity according to the variationist model.

As Silva-Corvalán (1994) cogently demonstrated, intra-systemic changes are accelerated in situations of language contact characterized by transitional bilingualism, reliant upon parallel structures between the dominant language of society and the HL. Silva-Corvalán’s (1994) argument was predicated upon conditions of “normal intergenerational transmission,” in which the question of quantity of input plays a crucial role (cf. O’Grady, Lee, & Lee, 2011). For many scholars, reduced input in the

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5 O’Grady, Lee and Lee (2011) suggested that: “...what matters for language acquisition is not so much the frequency of particular forms as it is the frequency of clear-cut instantiations of mappings between form and meaning. That is, children do not learn the past tense suffix or the definite article simply by encountering the forms -ed and the. Rather, learning takes
home language is the principal factor that may lead to differences in resulting knowledge between NSs and HL speakers (Benmamoun et al., 2013; Montrul, 2008, 2016; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; Polinsky, 2006; Silva-Corvalán, 2014). All involved in HL research and teaching can likely agree that, most commonly, child bilinguals experience socialization in the majority language of society and schooling, and this experience entails reduced levels of input in the HL (in terms of both quantity and quality) vis-à-vis L1 acquirers in non-contact settings (see He, 2014, 2016, for a discussion). This means that the ongoing development of the HL takes a secondary place to the use of the majority language and, as a result, an individual’s HL becomes structurally and functionally the “weaker” or less preferred language—something that the great majority of HL speakers/learners themselves affirm. The ultimate outcome of a more restricted social use of the HL, concomitant with an interrupted or delayed process of acquisition of the language during childhood and adolescence, is what was originally—though perhaps infelicitously—termed “incomplete acquisition.”

Putnam and Sánchez (2013) argued against the (over) reliance on the notion of “insufficient input” in HL research to date, emphasizing that focus must shift from HL grammars as a result of incomplete acquisition to HL grammars as a process of acquisition. According to these authors, the input to which HL acquirers are typically exposed leads to strong comprehension (or receptive) abilities, but if there is no individual agency or effort to put the language into actual use—which they term “activation of functional features,” productive ability does not develop. This argument regarding the apparent input-output dialectic in language acquisition is reminiscent of the debate in SLA during the 1990s, in which some scholars maintained that input was the key factor in L2 acquisition while others, like Swain (1985), asserted that output was equally crucial in L2 development, since output leads to input in the social practice of communication.

Clearly, limited use (i.e., output) of the HL in lived, social practice, as well as lack of the knowledge associated with formal education and exposure to a standard variety (e.g., Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998; Pires & Rothman, 2009), are also principal factors to be accounted for in what perhaps may be more aptly characterized as “divergent attainment” (see Scontras, Fuchs, & Polinsky (2015) for the term and discussion). We believe it is important that, moving beyond terminology in HL research in the years ahead, focus should be placed on contexts in which HL (socio-)linguistic behavior can be predictably different from that of NSs. This also necessitates further research on speaker identities (see Lynch (2014), and Potowski (2012) for overviews of this topic), the role of ideologies in HL settings (Valdés, González, López García, & Márquez, 2008), and community engagement and service-learning (see the December, 2016 special issue of Heritage Language Journal).
Such an inclusive approach would be consistent with Otheguy’s conception that the most reasonable way to approach HL grammars is by inserting them into the class of native speakers (Otheguy, 2016, p. 311). We would go further still, pointing out that by limiting his considerations to the case of second-generation bilinguals—who generally reflect much higher levels of proficiency than third- and fourth-generation HL speakers/learners—Otheguy’s specific proposal would dismiss from HL research and teaching a large and socially significant swath of the HL population, in particular, HL speakers of Spanish in the US. Villa and Rivera-Mills (2009) and Lynch (2012) both point out that the concept of “generation” in studies of HL Spanish in the U.S. can be problematic in two respects: (i) in some places such as the U.S.-Mexico border region and South Florida, high levels of HL proficiency can be observed in some third- and fourth-generation speakers, as bilingualism can be cyclical; and (ii) in some cases, second-generation speakers may reflect lower levels of proficiency than third- or even fourth-generation speakers. Villa and Rivera-Mills affirm that “It is the need to connect with a particular speech community that requires a change in the traditional unidirectional, linear pattern of change to a more circular one, in which at any given point and with any generation there is the opportunity to recapture the HL, thereby promoting a more stable bilingualism” (2009, p. 30).

Otheguy suggests that “when confronted with unfamiliar items in speakers who have used a language form earliest infancy, what we are witnessing is dialectal differences among natives rather than incompleteness” (2016, p. 310). But the proposal to regard HL as popular dialect in some ways confounds the sort of dialectal processes of variability that characterize contexts where there is cross-generational continuity with the myriad sorts of non-dialectal processes widely attested in contexts characterized by (socio-)linguistic discontinuity; it also ignores the reality of L2-like features in HL systems, particularly in lower-proficiency HL speakers and third- and fourth-generation bilinguals (Lynch, 2003, 2008; Montrul, 2005). This brings us to the more specific matter of what HL speakers know and how they deploy that knowledge in production.

4. What Do HL Speakers Know and How Do They Deploy That Knowledge?

Despite the heterogeneity of their demographic profiles and levels of proficiency, certain characteristics of HL speakers appear to be consistent. At the phonological level, HL speakers diverge from their NS counterparts in aspects of pronunciation and prosody (Barlow, 2014; Chang, 2016; Chang & Yao, 2016; Godson, 2003; Łyskawa et al., 2016; Rao, 2015) but regularly outperform L2 speakers both in production and

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6 Otheguy (2016) argues that “[p]eople who sincerely claim a strongly felt Latino [i.e. HL] identity, but whose early childhood experiences are such that it is very unlikely that a Spanish [HL] grammar would have formed, do not qualify for research investigating second-generation bilingual Spanish competence” (p. 309).
comprehension of phonetic material and phonological contrasts (Amengual, 2016; Au et al., 2008; Chang, 2016; Gor, this volume). Matched-guise studies show that NSs can easily identify HL speakers (Lein, Kupisch, & van de Weier, 2016) but HLs are also distinguishable from the most advanced L2 learners.

In addressing the differences between HLs and the corresponding baseline languages, it is helpful to think of HLs as innovating or changing the principles present in the baseline—rather than missing or losing something, which is still often the case in approaches to HLs. To put it differently, HL speakers have a grammar that may be different from that of the baseline, but that grammar is internally consistent. The grammar relies on changes that are incipient in the baseline and on universal principles of language design. The latter is particularly apparent in lexical innovations. Unlike L2 speakers, HL speakers may even create new phrases using structures that are absent in both their languages, relying on pattern-based behavior and decomposition of meaningful elements (see Rakhilina, Vyrenkova, & Polinsky, 2016, for a discussion).

Let us explore some innovations in HLs. At the syntactic level, HL speakers tend to impose rigid word order where NSs allow for flexibility (Isurin & Ivanova-Sullivan, 2008; Ivanova-Sullivan, 2014; Laleko & Dubinina, this volume). Their inventory of syntactic dependencies is more limited than in NSs, but they nevertheless follow the universal principles underlying native grammars (Polinsky, 2011).

One of the most vulnerable areas in HL grammars is inflectional morphology, the domain of greatest change and innovation. At the morphological level, HL speakers are known to eliminate irregular forms, both in the nominal and verbal domains (Benmamoun et al., 2013; Viswanath, 2013). General loss or strong attrition of agreement is often seen as a hallmark of HLs, regardless of the particular language dyads involved (i.e., the specific HL and dominant language spoken by the respective HL group). In the nominal domain, HL speakers are known to perform differently than NSs in the production and comprehension of agreement in gender (see Håkansson, 1995, for Swedish; Montrul, Foote, & Perpiñán, 2008, Scontras, Fuchs, & Polinsky, 2018, for Spanish; Polinsky, 2008a, for Russian), definiteness (Håkansson, 1995, for Swedish; Montrul & Ionin, 2010, for Spanish), case marking (Polinsky, 1997, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, for Russian; Song, O’Grady, Cho, & Lee, 1997, for Korean), and topic marking (Laleko & Polinsky, 2013, 2016 for Japanese and Korean). In the verbal domain, HL speakers across the board struggle with gender and number agreement (Benmamoun et al., 2013), grammatical aspect (Montrul, 2002, for Spanish; de Groot, 2005; Fenyvesi, 2000, for Hungarian), mood (Lynch, 1999; Montrul, 2009; Silva-Corvalán, 1994, for Spanish; Polinsky, 2006, for Russian; Fenyvesi, 2000, for Hungarian), and inflected infinitives (Rothman, 2007, for Brazilian Portuguese). Remarkably, however, HL speakers do not have problems with tense marking (except when they avoid irregular forms, such as English irregular verbs) and do not show evidence of tense restructuring (Polinsky, 2006; Sherkina-Lieber, Pérez-Leroux, & Johns, 2011).
In that sense, HL speakers are similar to L2 learners, who are also known to acquire tense relatively easily while at the same time struggling with aspect (Slabakova, 2003, 2009; Salaberry, 2008). The explanation for this discrepancy may be sought in the distinction between core grammar, which is associated with tense, and grammar interfacing with other domains such as interpretation, which is where mood and aspect are implicated. But for our present purposes, what matters most is the observation that grammatical structures of different HLs have much in common and can be accounted for by appealing to universal principles of language design. Once these principles are applied, we can recognize and even predict gaps in the knowledge of HL speakers.

The next question is whether these gaps or changes in grammar are motivated by the considerations of usage or grammar. The null hypothesis holds that HL speakers possess the same knowledge as NSs, i.e., a HL speaker of a particular dialect of Spanish has the same grammatical knowledge of Spanish as a NS of that dialect. If the knowledge is the same, then the differences we observe in behavior arise from usage limitations. Faced with the costly task of performing in their less dominant and lesser-used language, HL speakers diverge from NSs because of the overwhelming processing load. The observed differences are therefore signs of the relative scarcity of processing resources; HL speakers do not have the resources to deploy their grammar, but the grammar itself is intact and matches the NS baseline (consider Otheguy, 2016, and the discussion in Section 3 above). This idea is behind the conception that HL grammars are shaped by considerations of processing economy (Tsimpli, Sorace, Heycock, & Filiaci, 2004; Sorace, 2004). If so, with enough resources and more sustained input, such speakers could be brought to the native-like level. If HL speakers are found to have non-normative production (which is where processing resources may be more taxed) but have unimpeded, native-like comprehension in the same domain, that could be particularly strong evidence in favor of the processing limitations on their systems (cf. Putnam & Sánchez, 2013). Surprisingly, comparisons between HL production and comprehension are scarce; meanwhile, such comparisons are needed to test the processing-economy accounts of HLs.

A number of studies show that HL re-learners are only selectively better than L2 learners, with the advantages not going beyond phonology (Au et al., 2002; Knightly, Jun, Oh, & Au, 2003; Potowski, Jegerski, & Morgan-Short, 2009)—especially true for HL re-learners who are at the lower end of the bilingual proficiency continuum. Such selective advantages in re-learning are further corroborated by comprehension studies that target the deployment of actual grammatical knowledge rather than processing deficits. Several such studies, targeting lower-proficiency HL speakers, indicate that there are differences in underlying grammatical representations between such speakers and NS controls. For example, Sherkina-Lieber et al. (2011) and Sherkina-Lieber (2015) attest to a significant reanalysis of agreement in heritage Labrador Inuittitut as compared to the NS baseline. Additionally, Scontras, Polinsky, & Fuchs
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(2018) show that HL speakers of Spanish organize grammatical number and gender differently than NSs; the latter clearly distinguish them as two separate categories involved in agreement, whereas the former bundle them into a single category. The result is a difference in representations that accounts for changes in the overall agreement system of HL Spanish.

It is quite possible that performance limitations can eventually lead to grammatical restructuring. Such a chain of developments is often at the source of historical change in language, where variation in the way language cues are produced or perceived can trigger an innovative internal grammar (cf. Lightfoot, 1999; Mougeon & Nadasdi, 1998, discussed in Section 2 above). Historical change is reconstructed, thus typically hypothetical. HLs therefore have the added value of showing us how change may unfold in real time, which makes them even more valuable for linguistic research. But just as children who serve as agents of generational change in their language do not cease to be NSs of that language, so can HL speakers represent the continuum of native speakerhood. It behooves the linguist and the educator to understand what such a continuum involves and to adjust their expectations accordingly.

5. Conclusion

At this point, the rapidly growing field of HL research requires dialogue among our various sub-disciplines, recognizing shared challenges and goals. Perhaps the most immediate of those challenges and goals is the immense variance evident among HL speakers; the need for better and more consistent assessment methodologies; and the hope to outline HL (re-)learning principles and the concomitant pedagogical practices from which HL learners will most benefit. On sociolinguistic grounds, much remains to be said about the acquisition and awareness of sociolinguistic variants in the HL; speaker agency and identities; “passing” as native in terms of contextually-situated language performativity; the role of ideologies in HL settings; community engagement and service-learning, and L2-HL learner interactions in the classroom. From the perspective of HL grammatical systems, more work needs to be done to distinguish effects of processing difficulties or memory limitations from more profound restructuring of HL grammars. As we mentioned above, few studies draw such comparisons in a planned and direct way. But all these (and other) pieces are needed to assemble the ever-expanding puzzle that depicts a NS of any given language.

References


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