

Syntactic complexity in heritage speakers' discourse: a corpus study

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Heritage languages are defined as first languages (L1) and at the same time as non-dominant languages of the larger community (see Rothman 2009, Montrul 2016, Polinsky 2018, Tsehaye et al. 2021). This means that although heritage languages are acquired as native languages, their status is, or changes, into being the weak language of the heritage speaker (HS) quite early in the language acquisition process. One of the repercussions of this switch in HSs' language dominance is that HSs are believed to end up producing syntactically "simpler" structures in their heritage language compared to monolingually raised speakers (see e.g. Polinsky 2018). In the current study, we aim to investigate the extent to which this assumption holds by examining HSs' syntactic complexity in the context of spoken and written production in formal and informal settings. Our main focus is HSs' complex syntax beyond sentential boundaries, at the intra-clause level realized within and between boundaries, and its role in discourse organization of HSs' spoken and written texts in their heritage and majority languages (Berman & Ravid 2008, Bybee & Hopper 2001).

We conducted a corpus analysis of a subset of the RUEG corpus (<https://hu.berlin/rueg-corpus>). The RUEG corpus comprises heritage and majority language texts in Greek, German, Turkish, Russian and English elicited according to the Language situations set-up (Wiese et al. 2019) yielding different communicative situations in formal and informal settings, and spoken and written modalities. Our analysis includes Greek and English texts produced by 24 Greek/English heritage speakers in the US, 24 monolingually raised speakers in the US, 24 monolingually raised Greek speakers in Greece, and Greek and German texts produced by 20 heritage Greek/German speakers in Germany, and 20 monolingually raised speakers in Germany. We analyzed the frequency of main (MC) and subordinate clauses (SC) in heritage and majority speakers' texts, as well as the number of clauses per CU ("communication unit", equivalent to T-Unit ("minimal terminal unit")) defined as "one main clause plus any subordinate clause or non-clausal structure that is attached to or embedded in it" (Hunt 1970: 4), and we also analyzed types of connectivity in sentential boundaries and connectors used to introduce embedded clauses.

The analysis of the English texts showed that monolingual English speakers and Greek HSs have a similar distribution of MCs and SCs. In both groups, MCs were more frequent than SCs with the exception of formal written settings in which MCs and SCs were equally frequent. In the German texts, Greek HSs had a similar pattern of clausal distribution to monolingual German speakers in formal but not in informal settings. Overall the differences between monolingual and Greek HS in the majority languages (English, German) were not many. The analysis of the Greek texts showed that Greek HSs produced fewer SCs than monolingual Greek speakers across all communicative situations. However, the distribution of SC types was the same across all three groups. This means that although HSs produced fewer SCs than monolinguals, Greek HSs overall pattern of subordination was not different than that of monolinguals.

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