

Underuse and overgeneralization in child heritage Romanian

Larisa Avram*, Alexandru Mardale** and Elena Soare***

*University of Bucharest, **INALCO – SeDyL, CNRS, ***University Paris 8 – SFL, CNRS

Background and aim. A significant amount of research focused on the similarity of biases in language acquisition and diachronic change. Some studies show that children do not only create innovative forms but they also increment incipient changes (Biberauer 2019, Cournane 2019). Other studies show that children underuse certain overt elements, a preference for economy also attested in language change (Roeper 1999). The present study is intended to contribute to this debate, presenting a case where the acquisition of one property, undergoing a change in the target-language, involves both underuse and overgeneralization. Heritage language acquisition offers a good testbed for language change; incipient changes in the baseline are accelerated in this learning context (Kupisch & Polinsky 2021). We probe into the acquisition of differential object marking (DOM) in child heritage Romanian, with a view to shedding some light on the conditions under which an incipient change may get amplified in acquisition under “extreme language contact” (Kupisch & Polinsky 2021:2). **DOM in Romanian in a nutshell.** In Romanian, DOM is obligatory with animate proper names (PNs) and (in)animate (definite) pronouns (1). In this case the marker is clitic doubling (CD), i.e. the object is preceded by the preposition *pe* and doubled by an Accusative clitic. DOM is optional with descriptive DPs. In this case, the marker is either *pe* alone or CD (2) and it applies to animate DPs. But DOM may be (rarely) encountered with inanimate DPs in spoken Romanian (with an upgrading effect) (3) and there are configurations where animacy can or must be overridden (Irimia 2020); these configurations always involve CD. Additionally, optional DOM is undergoing a diachronic change, with CD gradually replacing single *pe*. The contemporary language features two parallel systems. Some speakers accept exclusively CD as DOM. Others allow both single *pe* and CD. **Predictions for language acquisition.** The input children receive includes samples of both grammars. If children drive incrementation of incipient changes, they should use CD to the detriment of single *pe*. The extended use of CD, which is more permissive with respect to animacy, may further weaken the role of this feature in the system, possibly creating the conditions for one more incipient change. If child generalization is in the direction of (possible) incipient changes, we expect learners to use DOM with inanimate DPs at a rate higher than the one in the input. **Method.** In order to test these predictions we designed an acceptability judgment task with 16 test sentences across 2 conditions: DOM (= CD) with (i) proper names (PNs); (ii) common nouns (CNs), balanced for animacy (4-6). 45 child heritage speakers (CHSs) of Romanian (7-, 9- and 11-year-olds), born to Romanian families living in France, took part in the study. Their responses were compared to those of 45 age-matched Romanian monolinguals (RMs) living in the homeland. **Results and discussion.** All CHSs used DOM with animate DPs at a relatively high rate, increasing with age. But they incorrectly accepted unmarked animate PNs and under-accepted (optional) DOM with CNs as late as age 11, i.e. CHSs underuse and overgeneralise DOM (Fig. 1). RMs accepted DOM with PNs almost at ceiling as early as age 7 and at very high rates in optional contexts (70% at age 7, 92% at age 9 and 100% at age 11), indicating that changes in progress are amplified by monolingual learners. We argue that CHSs underuse DOM because it is a property at the syntax-discourse interface. According to Hill & Mardale (2021), DOM involves a topic feature, checked by *pe* in

single *pe* DOM (6) and by the clitic in CD (7). In bilingual acquisition, properties at the syntax-discourse interface are vulnerable (Sorace 2011). Diachronic incrementation probably cannot obtain in language contact situations when the property undergoing change is an interface one. All CHSs accepted DOM with inanimate DPs at high rates, diverging from the input. There was a slight increase from age 7 to age 9, followed by retraction at age 11 (Fig. 2). The 7-year-old monolinguals also accepted DOM with inanimate PNs (45%) but there was a significant decrease from age 7 to age 9, when inanimate DPs are marked at a rate below 10. These findings show that CHSs amplify a possible incipient change to an extent higher than the one found with monolinguals. This extension is not random and does not reflect a deteriorated DOM system. It reflects a developmental path in line with the changing potential of the system. Retraction, the result of perfect input matching, is slower under conditions of language contact. When the input is reduced, the innovative property may get amplified over a longer period.

Examples

- (1) a. *(L-) am desenat *(pe) Ion/ *(pe) el.
CL.3m.s have drawn PE Ion PE him
'I drew Ion/him.'
- b. *L- am vizitat *pe București.
CL.3m.s have visited PE Bucharest
'I visited Bucharest.'
- (2) a. (L-) am desenat pe copil.
CL.3m.s have drawn PE child
'I drew the child.'
- b. Am desenat copilul
have drawn child-the
'I drew the child.'
- (3) Uitați cum o facem pe mămliguță.
look how CL.3f.s make PE polenta-DIM
'Look how we are making this little polenta'
- (4) a. Turiștii vizitează Parisul./ *Turiștii **îl** vizitează **pe** Paris. 'Tourists visit Paris.'
b. *Mama piaptână Ioana./ Mama **o** piaptână **pe** Ioana. 'Mother is combing Ioana.'
- (5) a. Copilul a tăiat hârtia./ *Copilul a tăiat-**o** **pe** hârtie. 'The child cut the sheet of paper.'
b. Mama ajută fetița./Mama **o** ajută **pe** fetiță. 'Mother is helping the little girl.'
- (6) [KP [K_[TOPIC][PERSON] *pe* [DP D_[DEFINITE]...]]
- (7) [KP K-clitic_[TOPIC] [DP D₁ - *pe*[PERSON] [DP D_[DEFINITE] NP ...]]]

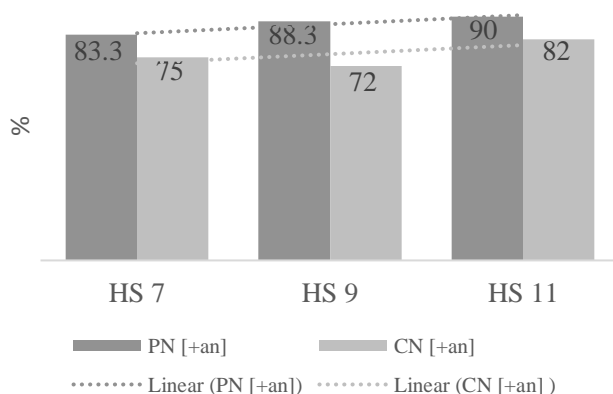


Fig. 1. CHSs: DOM with [+animate] objects

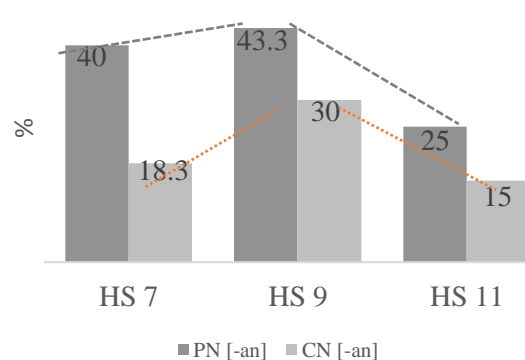


Fig. 2. CHS: DOM with [-animate] objects

References. **Biberauer, T. (2019)** ‘Children always go beyond the input: The Maximise Minimal Means perspective’, *Theoretical Linguistics* 45 (3-4): 211–224. **Cournane, A.** 2019. A developmental view on incrementation in language change. *Theoretical Linguistics* 45 (3-4): 127-150. **Irimia, M.** 2020. Variation in differential object marking: On some differences between Spanish and Romanian. *Open Linguistics* <https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2020-0110>. **Hill, V., Mardale, A.** 2021. *The Diachrony of Differential Object Marking in Romanian*, OUP. **Kupisch, T., Polinsky, M.** 2021. Innovations in heritage languages and diachronic change. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 25(1). **Roeper, T.** 1999. Universal bilingualism. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 2(3). **Sorace, A.** 2011. Pinning down the concept of “interface” in bilinguals. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism* 1(1).