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Keeping a Critical Eye on Majority Language Influence: The Case of Uptalk in Heritage Spanish

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Abstract: The goal of this study is to highlight the importance of taking into account variations in monolingual grammars before discussing majority language influence as a possible source of heritage speakers' divergent grammars. In this study, we examine the production of uptalk in Spanish by heritage speakers of Mexican Spanish in Southern California. Uptalk (i.e., rising intonation contour at the end of a non-question utterance) is frequently associated with California English. Thus, heritage speakers' use of uptalk is often considered to be influenced from English intonation (i.e., the majority language). Although uptalk in Spanish is not well understood, it has been observed in Mexican Spanish, which calls attention to the importance of investigating uptalk in monolingual Spanish. Using a dyadic interaction task, we obtained spontaneous speech data of 16 heritage speakers and 16 monolingual speakers of Mexican Spanish and compared the phonological and phonetic properties of uptalks produced by the two groups. Our results demonstrated that the heritage speakers and the monolingual speakers produced uptalks with similar frequencies and mainly used L+H* HH% and L* HH% contours. However, the two groups had more differences than similarities. Specifically, heritage speakers' uptalks presented less dynamic contours and were produced with flatter rises than monolinguals' uptalks. Heritage speakers' divergent patterns showed close resemblance with patterns in English, suggesting majority language influence as a valid source of divergence. We discuss possible avenues for future research for a better understanding of the role of majority language influence on heritage Spanish uptalk.

Keywords: heritage language intonation; uptalk; heritage speakers; Spanish phonetics and phonology

1. Introduction

Heritage speakers are a type of bilinguals whose home language (i.e., heritage language) is different from the majority language of the society. Heritage speakers acquire both the heritage language and the majority language during childhood. However, since the heritage language is a minority language and its use is generally limited to certain domains (e.g., familial settings), heritage speakers often become more dominant in the majority language as they grow up (Benmamoun et al. 2013; Polinsky and Kagan 2007). In the past decade, experimental research on the structure of heritage languages has increased exponentially. Regardless of the specific areas of interest, a consensus reached by researchers in heritage language studies is that heritage grammars are not the same as monolingual grammars. While some linguistic properties in heritage languages may follow the monolingual norms, others demonstrate divergence. According to Polinsky and Scontras (2020), heritage speakers perform similarly to monolingual speakers in their use of linguistic properties that provide direct reference to real world entities and events (e.g., determiner, tense), whereas they show divergence in dependencies at distance (e.g., agreement morphology, long-distance syntactic dependencies), absence of form (e.g., form-meaning association of null elements), and ambiguous structures (e.g., scope interpretation of ambiguous structures). Although heritage language phonology has received relatively less attention