

The missing link in Spanish heritage trill production

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Research Article

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Abstract

While heritage language phonology has attracted a great deal of attention, little is known about the development of heritage phonological grammars. This study examines the production of the Spanish trill /r/ by school-aged (9–10 years) and adult heritage speakers. Results showed that the adult heritage speakers produced the trill in a more target-like manner than the child heritage speakers, although half of them diverged from non-heritage native baselines reported in other studies. Further analysis of the distribution of trill variants suggests that heritage Spanish trill development occurs in the order of single lingual constriction → frication → multiple lingual constrictions. However, instead of abandoning variants of early stages, some adult heritage speakers kept them in their trill inventories, demonstrating increased variability. Our findings indicate that 9- to 10-year-old heritage speakers are still in the process of developing heritage phonological grammars and even during adulthood their grammars may not reach stability.

1. Introduction

Heritage speakers are simultaneous or early sequential bilinguals that acquire a family language that is different from the societal language (Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky, 2013). Heritage speakers receive heritage language input mainly in colloquial registers and are rarely exposed to formal varieties. During the school years, heritage speakers become in frequent contact with the societal language and potentially shift their dominance from the heritage language to the societal language (Polinsky & Scontras, 2020; Stevens, 1992). Given these circumstances, heritage speakers are not a homogeneous group. Instead, they display rich heterogeneity in terms of their linguistic proficiency, use, and attitudes toward the heritage language (Montrul, 2008; Valdés, 2014), and demonstrate divergence from monolingual speakers to varying degrees. Potential causes of heritage speakers' divergent grammars are insufficient amount of heritage language input (Putnam, 2019; Putnam & Sánchez, 2013), exposure to input lacking target linguistic properties (Pires & Rothman, 2009), exposure to linguistic varieties other than the parents' varieties, or lack of access to monolingual forms (Lowther Pereira, 2015).

A great deal of heritage language studies have been conducted on morphosyntactic properties in which divergence from monolingual norms has been found (Montrul & Bowles, 2009; Montrul & Sánchez-Walker, 2013; Polinsky, 2008, among others). Compared to this, less research has been done in phonological domains, most likely given that positive effects of early exposure have been attested on heritage language pronunciation (Au, Knightly, Jun & Oh, 2002; Knightly, Jun, Oh & Au, 2003). Nevertheless, recent studies on heritage language phonology discuss the existence of a “heritage accent” (Au, Oh, Knightly, Jun & Romo, 2008; Lloyd-Smith, Einfeldt & Kupisch, 2020; Stangen, Kupisch, Proietti Ergün & Zielke, 2015) and found deviations from monolingual norms at both segmental (Amengual, 2012, 2016; Elias, McKinnon & Milla-Muñoz, 2017; Godson, 2004; Kissling, 2018; Ronquest, 2013; Willis, 2005) and suprasegmental levels (Chang, Yao, Haynes & Rhodes, 2011; Colantoni, Cuza & Mazzaro, 2016; Henriksen, 2016; Kim, 2019; Kim, 2020). For instance, Au et al. (2008) found that Spanish heritage speakers, regardless of whether they regularly used Spanish during childhood, sounded more native-like than late L2 learners, but when compared with non-heritage native speakers, their speech was perceived to have a stronger foreign accent. That is, although early exposure to the heritage language has positive effects on heritage language pronunciation, it does not guarantee accent-free speech (Lloyd-Smith et al., 2020).

In order to move the field of heritage language acquisition forward, recent scholarship (Montrul, 2018; Polinsky, 2018) has urged to examine the stages of heritage language development over the lifespan. This type of research would provide a better understanding of heritage speakers' divergent grammars. In this study, we adopt a developmental approach to examine heritage language phonology.

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