Bernhard Brehmer
(Universität Greifswald)

Case as an (in)vulnerable domain in heritage language grammars? Some observations from a longitudinal study on heritage Russian and Polish in Germany

Wann? 05.11.2018, 16.15-17.45 Uhr
Wo? Dorotheenstr. 65, Raum 5.57

Abstract

One of the main goals of theoretical linguists working on heritage languages has been to analyse how heritage grammars differ from monolingual grammars. More specifically, the focus has been on whether the noncanonical patterns that can be observed in heritage speakers are due to interrupted acquisition, attrition, non-target like input or universal principles of language change, and whether these noncanonical patterns are not random, but follow a certain systematicity (cf., e.g., Benmamoun/Montrul/Polinsky 2013, Polinsky 2018). In the latter case, they are often treated as evidence for the emergence of new grammars (or varieties) that are different from the homeland varieties.
Case marking has been identified to be a very likely candidate for systematic restructuring in heritage grammars (cf. Benmamoun/Montrul/Polinsky 2013: 154ff.). Thus, Polinsky (2006) describes a systematic pattern of case restructuring in heritage Russian spoken in the U.S. which leads to the merging of nominative and accusative forms of all declensional classes and a loss of other case forms (e.g., genitive and prepositive) in less proficient heritage speakers. For Russian as a heritage language in Germany the picture is less clear: While Gagarina (2013) reports on omission of inflectional endings in spontaneous speech in child heritage speakers, Anstatt (2011) observes single deviations from monolingual case marking in adolescent heritage speakers of Russian which are, however, rather idiosyncratic, thus offering no evidence for a restructuring of the case system in German Russian.
In the talk I want to systematically analyse whether case marking is indeed a vulnerable domain for heritage speakers of Russian and Polish in Germany by using different types of data sets and adopting a longitudinal perspective. In a longitudinal project we collected data on 26 Russian and 23 Polish adolescent heritage speakers who were tested four times (years 2014, 2015, 2017

and 2018) for their mastering of the case system in their heritage language. Data were gathered by using experimental tasks targeting production (elicited oral narratives, filling in gaps in a cloze test) as well as perception (grammaticality judgment task) of case forms in Russian/ Polish. The main goal is to establish whether our informants exhibit signs of attrition with regard to case marking in their heritage language throughout the covered time span and, if yes, whether our data support the view of a tendency towards a systematic restructuring of the case system in heritage contexts. For this purpose, our results are compared to other studies dealing with case marking of heritage Russian and Polish in the European as well as North American contexts.

References:

Anstatt, T. (2011): Sprachattrition. Abbau der Erstsprache bei russisch-deutschen Jugendlichen. Wiener Slawistischer Almanach 67, 7–31.

Benmamoun, E. / Montrul, S. / Polinsky, M. (2013): Heritage languages and their speakers: Opportunities and challenges for linguistics. Theoretical Linguistics 39/3-4, 129–181.

Gagarina, N. (2013): Sprachdiagnostik in der Erstsprache mehrsprachiger Kinder (am Beispiel des Russischen). Sprache. Stimme. Gehör 37, 196–200.

Polinsky, M. (2006): Incomplete acquisition: American Russian. Journal of Slavic Linguistics 14, 192–265.

Polinsky, M. (2018): Heritage languages and their speakers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.