

Variable word order(s) in Slavic: Monolingual vs. heritage Bulgarian data

Teodora Radeva-Bork (University of Potsdam)

One of the main properties of Slavic languages is their syntactic flexibility, which provides a great level of variability in the ordering of sentence constituents. This paper deals with the acquisition of noncanonical word orders in Slavic, both in monolingual and heritage language contexts, and more specifically with the alternations between Verb-Object (VO) and Object-Verb (OV) word orders, both presenting licit combinations in the target grammar.

A data survey of Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian and Czech (Avrutin and Brun 2001, Mykhaylyk 2012, Radeva-Bork 2012, Ilić and Deen 2004, Smolík 2015), examines how monolingual children aged 1;7-6;0 deal with VO-OV alternations in naturalistic and elicitation contexts. I show that object scrambling and the basic operation VO-OV movement in Slavic emerge early, around the age of 2;5, and interact with object type (full/weak pronominal or full DP) and the semantic feature of specificity. Monolingual children hardly ever scramble objects that cannot scramble in the target grammar. On the contrary, to the extent that they make mistakes, these typically involve scrambling too little in conditions where scrambling is obligatory (or very frequent) in the adult language. In a broader cross-linguistic context, VO-OV alternations are shown to be acquired earlier in Slavic than object scrambling in Dutch and German and object shift in Mainland Scandinavian, which may be due to varying frequency effects in the input. Finally, from a Slavic perspective, noncanonical word orders in child grammar seem to show a disassociation between comprehension processing difficulties and ease of production.

Experimental data from Bulgarian heritage speakers give an additional perspective on the way syntactic flexibility is represented in grammar. I present results from an in-depth study of six heritage Bulgarian children, aged 5;9-11;0, whose dominant language is German. Heritage speakers seem to be more conservative with regards to the variability in the ordering of sentence constituents since they show a clear preference to VO structures and almost never resort to scrambling. No significant contrast between cases of pronominal scrambling and full DP scrambling could be established, which shows that, others than with monolinguals, the kind of object does not have an effect. When compared to monolingual controls, we find a reverse dissociation- young heritage speakers do not exhibit comprehension difficulties but choose not to produce noncanonical word orders. The findings also indicate that whereas the production of various permutations seems to follow the principles of Information Structure (IS) from early on in monolinguals, i.e. around 3;0, the integration of the knowledge of the pragmatic principles related to IS seems to be inactive in heritage speakers. This could mean that heritage speakers do not have access to pragmatics from the start, or that they build on the grounds of syntax-only.

In heritage grammars, where speakers are limited in their deployment of complex grammatical phenomena, language structure sometimes follows what looks like a default design, employing a seemingly restricted set of grammatical categories and operations. Rigid word order, often accompanied by the placement of closely associated items next to each other, may be such a default-like structure. This has been attested for other heritage languages (Isurin and Ivanova-Sullivan 2008, Ivanova-Sullivan 2014). All of these properties appear to at least superficially make the heritage language more user-friendly, in accord with general properties of language structure (cf. Scontras, Fuchs and Polinsky 2015).

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