

Is there a difference? Interpretation in Advanced vs. Intermediate Hispanic Heritage Speakers

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Studies looking at the language of heritage speakers are interested in learning about the stability of language before the critical period and how grammar develops under reduced input conditions (Benmamoun et al. 2010). In this study the aim is to investigate the impact of reduced input on a component within the Null-Subject Parameter - the Overt Pronoun Constraint (OPC) (Montalbetti 1984) - by focusing on the mental representation of the OPC in Hispanic heritage speakers (2nd generation immigrants of Hispanic background). The goal in this study is to probe into the interpretations that bilingual heritage speakers assign to overt pronouns in the subordinate clause with quantified and *wh-word* antecedents.

The OPC restricts the possible antecedents that an overt pronoun can have. Specifically, it states the restrictions on this pronoun when it has a quantified expression (*someone, no one*) or a *wh*-phrase (*who, which*) as its antecedent. As a null subject language, Spanish allows the speaker to omit the subject of the sentence. Examples (1a) and (1b) below show that unlike the null pronoun, the overt pronoun in the subordinate clause can never bind with the quantified expression or *wh*-phrase: The overt pronoun needs to refer to a third person within the discourse. On the other hand, if the pronoun is covert, the sentence becomes ambiguous and allows for a less restrictive interpretation.

Following Montalbetti (1984), I assume that all quantifiers will be treated equally. Moreover, following a generative framework, it is assumed that the Null Subject Parameter is set early in the grammars of these null-subject heritage languages (Chomsky, 1981; Jaeggli, 1982; Rizzi, 1982), and thus they will demonstrate understanding of the interpretative restrictions found with subordinate overt pronouns with quantified antecedents.

20 Hispanic heritage speakers participated in the experiment. Participants were asked to complete a picture matching task, which looked at a forced interpretation of the OPC and a sentence selection task, which allowed participants to provide their own interpretation of the sentence by choosing between two pictures. Both tasks tested interpretation of the implicit knowledge of the OPC with quantified antecedents.

Results for the Picture-Matching task show that advanced heritage speakers understand the interpretative contrast present with overt and null pronouns within OPC contexts. However, a difference is found between advanced and intermediate heritage speakers, where the intermediate group appears to have more difficulty in the Sentence-Selection task: They do not differentiate between null and overt pronouns. Results suggest lower-proficiency participants have difficulty with the reading/comprehension component of the task, but the OPC remains in their grammars.

Examples:

Overt (1a) Nadie_i cree que él_{j/*i} va a ganar
No one believes that he will win.

Null (1b) Nadie_i cree que Ø_{ij} va a ganar
No one believes that *pro* will win.

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