

Relating Heritage Language Acquisition and Diachronic Change: Clitics, Null objects, and Subject inversion in Portuguese as Heritage Language in Germany

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Heritage speakers (HSs) are simultaneous or early successive bilingual speakers who acquire their heritage language (HL) as a minority language within the family and a dominant societal majority language. The outcome of this process of bilingual language acquisition may show particularities which have been attributed to different sources, e.g. reduced input, cross-linguistic influence, or lack of formal education. In this talk, I will argue that some particularities of HL are the result of diachronic change and follow patterns predictable from well established diachronic pathways (Flores & Rinke 2020, Kupisch & Polinsky 2022, Polinsky & Scontras 2020, Rinke & Flores 2014). I will illustrate this claim based on different phenomena attested in European and Brazilian Portuguese as HL in Germany.

A study on morphosyntactic knowledge of clitics (Rinke & Flores 2014) revealed that HSs of European Portuguese (EP) accept isolated accentuated dative pronouns without a resumptive clitic more easily than isolated accusative pronouns, although the occurrence of strong pronouns generally requires the presence of a clitic in EP. The omission of dative clitics, which is also attested in the monolingual controls to some extent, relates to their lower semantic load in comparison to accusative clitics (Andersen 1982, Bleam 1999), which may have an effect on diachronic development: datives typically change before the accusative is affected (see Fischer & Rinke 2013, Gabriel & Rinke 2010 for diachronic evidence from Spanish). Hence, the linguistic knowledge of the HSs may be “innovative, because it promotes linguistic changes which are inherent in the speech of native monolinguals” (Rinke & Flores 2014: 681).

A similar conclusion is reached concerning the distribution of null objects in EP as HL in a corpus study of two generations of Portuguese migrants living in Germany (Rinke, Flores & Barbosa 2018). The analysis showed that the production of null objects was more expressive in the speech of EP HSs than in the speech of the first generation migrants or the L1 speakers living in Portugal. Furthermore, HSs produced significantly more animate null objects than the other speaker groups. The authors argue that by expanding the use of null objects to animate referents, the HSs extend the semantic-pragmatic conditions of null object realization along the referential hierarchy, a universal diachronic pathway predicted by Cyrino, Duarte & Kato (2000) for BP.

In a third study, we investigated whether the alleged ongoing change concerning the loss of subject-verb inversion in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) (see Kato 2000) is also found in HSs of BP living in Germany (Rinke, Flores, Oliveira & Correia, under review). The results revealed that overall the HSs show a very similar tendency to reject inversion as monolingual speakers of BP, despite of abundant VS orders in their contact language German. In sentences with unaccusative verbs in narrow subject focus contexts, monolinguals do not distinguish between SV and VS, demonstrating evidence for a residual postverbal subject position in these constructions. In contrast, bilinguals are quite strict in their rejection of VS order also in this context. This finding may again be interpreted as indicating an acceleration of ongoing diachronic change: bilingual speakers are on their way to eliminate a residual position from their grammatical system due to the availability of a functionally identical alternative preverbal focus position and the ongoing change concerning the null subject grammar of BP.

In sum, the mentioned studies show that HSs may accelerate or promote ongoing diachronic changes. However, “divergence is a possible, but not a necessary outcome of HL development” (Flores & Rinke 2020). In the cases reported so far, HSs did accelerate and further develop diachronic changes, but they did not initiate them, meaning that based on typical diachronic pathways we can predict to some extent but not *whether* HLs will develop in the predicted direction.

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