Object clitics and null objects in heritage Portuguese in Germany: evidence from experimental and corpus studies

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Heritage speakers (HSs) are simultaneous or successive bilinguals who acquired their heritage language (HL) in the context of a dominant environmental language (cf. Valdès 2000, Rothman 2009). Because of the special conditions shaping HL-acquisition and use – and ultimately HSs linguistic competence – they are of particular interest not only for bilingualism research but also for a better understanding of language structures, acquisition and change. Based on experimental and corpus studies on the realization and acquisition of object clitics and null objects in European Portuguese (EP) as HL in Germany, this talk discusses potential contributions of studies on heritage grammars to linguistic theory.

More concretely, it focusses on 1. effects of different sources of input in acquisition, 2. the identification of ongoing processes of language change, and 3. effects of variation and complexity in the input. Concerning the first aspect, Rinke & Flores (2014) show that EP HSs knowledge of clitics reflects their reliance on colloquial input. By implication, HL allow us to disentangle aspects of language which are related to intuitive knowledge from linguistic properties acquired through other learning mechanisms. Because HL are less affected by standardization, their linguistic behaviour may also be indicative of ongoing linguistic changes. In this vein, Rinke, Flores & Barbosa (2018) report an increase of animate null objects in comparison to monolingual speakers, reflecting an advancement along a referential hierarchy (cf. Cyrino et al. 2000 for BP). Effects of variation and complexity will be illustrated by comparing the acquisition of null objects by HSs of two null object + clitic languages, namely Portuguese and Polish. The study by Rinke, Flores and Sopata (2019) reveals that some factors determining the distribution of different types of objects represent a particularly complex acquisition task, showing that effects of linguistic complexity and input reduction selectively affect specific linguistic properties.