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Francesco Romano, Antonella Sorace

Conclusion and future directions

The purpose of this volume was to bring together a unique collection of studies in Italian as a heritage language. The research presented herein showcases a range of studies concerning knowledge, understanding, and use of Italian by bilingual/multilingual speakers raised in a local dominant language. Montrul (this volume) opens the discussion by providing a background overview of heritage languages and linguistics research. The chapter neatly summarises some of the key findings in these areas, measuring them against the unique contributions stemming from the studies of Italian presented in this volume. In discussing areas in need of further research, Montrul pinpoints the key role of dominant language transfer and sociopolitical factors as sources for explaining proficiency in as well as language maintenance or loss of heritage languages.

Part I, lining up a series of experimental studies of Italian as a heritage language, presents novel research findings of first and second generation heritage speakers of Italian. In their investigation, Guijarro-Fuentes et al. (this volume) found that first generation heritage Italian immigrants do not show evidence of attrition in relation to the partitive *ne*, a feature absent from their dominant language, Spanish, suggesting this to be an effect of the unadulterated linguistic input heritage speakers continue to receive after arriving the host country. In turn, Smith et al. (this volume) who compared first and second generation speakers of Italian in the UK, find important differences between these two populations with respect to clinical markers typical of Italian children with language impairment. Although qualitatively similar to first generation speakers of Italian, second generation heritage speakers are shown to quantitatively differ in their use of functional words relevant to sentence structure such as complementisers and clitics. Also a comparison of first and second generation speakers of Italian is Bonfatti-Sabbioni's chapter on Italian auxiliary selection. Her results show remarkable similarities in auxiliary selection between heritage speakers and their parents where the grammatical systems of both these groups are purported to be similarly attuned to semantic properties of the verb and sensitive to the unaccusativity gradient of native monolinguals (Sorace, 2000). In consequence, Bonfatti-Sabbioni crucially maintains that heritage grammars are native-like in terms of their sensitivity to syntactic-semantic grammatical information. Interesting native-like performance was also found in the expression of deontic and epistemic modality by the adult Italian heritage speakers investigated by Schmitz and Diaubalick (this volume). In this chapter, both qualitative and quantitative analyses show remarkable similarities between monolingual Italians and German-Italian adult bilinguals in the use of the subjunctive

imperfect and modal adverbs. To follow, Romano (this volume) reports findings on the role of age of onset in the ultimate attainment of gender by L2 and heritage speakers, testing the plausibility of computational versus representational accounts of morphological variability. Consistent with previous L2 and heritage research, a heritage Italian (i.e. early bilingual) and L2 Italian (i.e. late bilingual) group were found to be more alike than monolingual speakers with respect to knowledge of gender, suggesting age of onset is not implicated in ultimate attainment as claimed by representational accounts. Similar to accounts of morphological variability in L2 and heritage Spanish (McCarthy, 2009 and Grüter et al., 2012 for L2 *inter alia*; Montrul et al. 2008; Hur, Lopez-Otero, and Sanchez, 2020, for heritage *inter alia*), heritage speakers of Italian show vulnerability with respect to masculine forms during the processing of gender, consistent with computational accounts. Finally, the presence of gender in the L1 Swedish of the participants played a facilitative role in ultimate attainment of Italian gender. The role of age of onset is also investigated by Torregrossa et al. (this volume) where the acquisition of syntactic structures of differential complexity in child heritage speakers of Italian was shown to be sensitive to the interplay of language exposure variables and age of onset. The authors interpreted their results to mean that language exposure in critical periods seems to play a relevant role in bilingual language acquisition.

Part II lined up a series of observational studies whose focus was principally, though not exclusively, on qualitative aspects of the language used by first and third generation heritage speakers of Italian as well as speakers of the Piedmontese dialect in Argentina and the Campanian dialect in the UK. De Cristofaro and Badan (this volume) compare the use of discourse markers by first-generation heritage and L2 speakers of Italian in Belgium and monolingual native Italians. Their qualitative analyses reveal unlike the monolingual and L2 groups, that heritage speakers use discourse markers mainly with an interactional function. Moreover, they identify several code-switching patterns used by both the heritage and L2 speakers, even though the former implement the markers as “metalinguaging” devices and/or means to lowering cognitive load during communication. Next, by examining interactions between third-generation heritage speakers of Italian in the US on Facebook, Ferrini conducted a qualitative analysis of morphosyntactic integration. She provides evidence of code-switching patterns at both the morphological and syntactic level where contact phenomena involving the integration of dialectal or Italian lexical units with English inflection surfaced. In the final chapter, Di Salvo and Gorla investigate the effects of language contact between Piedmontese and Campanian Montefalcionese as heritage languages and Argentinian Spanish and British English respectively. That is two Italian dialects with split intransitivity (i.e., requiring the use of auxiliaries *be* and *have* in the past tense depending on verb semantics) are studied in contact with two dominant languages which employ

a single auxiliary *have* in the past tense. They found results differed by setting, despite the contact being between a language with split intransitivity and one without in both scenarios. Thus, while in Argentina, heritage Piedmontese speakers overextend use of auxiliary HAVE to BE when speaking Italian or Piedmontese, the same pattern is not attested for Montefalcionese to English.

In summary, this volume highlights the importance of studying heritage languages in all their complexity, as an essential component of our broader understanding of bilingualism, language maintenance and language change over generations. It also evidences the need to integrate different perspectives on the nature of bilingualism in heritage languages, which have often been considered separately. For example, one productive trend for future research is to analyse in greater depth the relationship between parental attrition in the heritage language and its acquisition by heritage speakers. Differences have been observed between changes in first-generation L1 speakers due to L2 acquisition, which are normally referred to as ‘attrition’, and changes in second-generation speakers of the same language. First-generation parents experiencing attrition provide input to their second-generation children which is often marked by increased variation in selective areas of grammar (Sorace, 2011): if second-generation speakers receive enough input in the heritage language, these changes may be regularized and become part of their grammar, paving the way for diachronic language change. Contextual variables and their interaction with linguistic input to heritage language speakers also deserve more scrutiny. Among qualitative factors, the social status of heritage languages plays an important role in the process of inter-generational transmission and affects the use of these languages both in individual speakers and in communities (see e.g. Peace-Hughes, de Lima, Cohen, Jamieson, Tisdall, and Sorace, 2021). More research is needed on whether qualitative factors have similar effects for different linguistic phenomena. For example, phenomena of alignment and priming among heritage language speakers (Costa, Pickering & Sorace 2008) may be differentially affected by structural constraints. A third trend for future research could look at how linguistic and cognitive factors interact in bilingualism with heritage languages, both in terms of learning predispositions, which may affect some aspects of language more than others, and cognitive effects of bilingualism outside the language domain, which may depend in part on typological similarity between languages.

In summary, the studies included in this volume open new perspectives and pave the way for future research in all three of these directions, while pointing to the crucial contribution of linguistics to a deeper understanding of bilingualism in any language and ultimately to the preservation of linguistic diversity.

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