Studying Heritage Languages with a Focus on Multilingualism

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In recent decades, the field of applied linguistics has witnessed a growth of interest in the study of multilingualism. A particular subset of studies in multilingualism is that of heritage languages (Montrul, 2010). A *heritage language* (HL) can be broadly defined as an ancestral language with which one feels a cultural connection (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003), or more narrowly defined as a home language that a person is exposed to in early childhood before becoming socialized into the host country's dominant language (Valdés, 2001).

The present discussion suggests a direction for future research for HLs. First, the various approaches through which HLs have been studied will be mentioned. Next, Cenoz and Gorter's (2011) *Focus on Multilingualism* (FOM) approach will be presented and discussed in relation to its potential contributions to the study HLs.

Approaches to the Study of Heritage Languages

Since HL speakers are often educated in the majority language and socialized into the mainstream culture, most HL adults come to have native-like mastery of the host country's majority language. Proficiency in their respective HLs, however, varies widely across speakers, (Montrul, 2010). HL acquisition and use depend on many factors. As a nascent, interdisciplinary field, the study of HLs and the multiple factors that influence HL development have been approached through a number of research frameworks by theoretical, socio-, and psycho-linguists (Sekerina, 2013). Theoretical linguists, for example, have sought to describe the nature of HL systems, investigating how HL forms systematically deviate from that of monolingual speakers. Sociolinguists, on the other hand, have been interested in the influence of sociocultural factors in HL development, such as speakers' attitudes, motivation, and identity. They have also focused on speaker-external factors such as the status of the HL, its maintenance by the HL community, and the availability of social networks. Finally, psycholinguists have focused on the nature of HL cognitive processing.

While these three different strands of research have contributed to broadening the current understanding of HLs, there is a need for a more holistic approach. As Sekerina (2013) contends, "assessing the interaction among these multiple factors and their interdependence in achieving native proficiency by advanced HL speakers is becoming an imperative in unifying the field of HL studies" (p. 66). A possible first step that can be taken toward this direction entails the use of a bottom-up, holistic framework for studying HL speakers' language use and development, such as the "Focus on Multilingualism" (Cenoz & Gurter, 2011) approach.

Toward a More Holistic Approach

Recently, Cenoz and Gorter (2011) proposed FOM as a tool for investigating multilingual speakers' linguistic competence. This approach seeks to account for all of the languages in the repertoire of a multilingual speaker by analyzing learners' languages side by side rather than

separately. The rationale for doing so is that linguistic systems within a multilingual's mind are interrelated, as shown through analyses of students' multilingual practices (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; Blackledge & Creese, 2010). Moreover, this approach guards against the all too simplistic method of comparing a multilingual's linguistic competence against a *monolingual yardstick*, an idea that echoes Bley-Vroman's (1983) call to eschew the comparative fallacy. Cenoz and Gorter argue that FOM can offer three main contributions to studies in multilingualism. In the following, these three contributions are discussed with their potential implications for research in HLs.

First, this approach explores how "different subsystems are connected across the languages in their development and the way they support each other" (p. 360). HL researchers have been aware of cross-linguistic influences on learners' developing linguistic systems, but no studies have looked at the acquisition and use of a learner's HL and the host country's dominant language side-by-side in the way proposed by FOM. Studies that have looked at competencies in both languages have often been limited to comparing competencies in terms of outcomes, i.e., exploring whether advanced proficiency in a language (or a linguistic domain like phonology) hinders proficiency in the other language (or corresponding domain). As HL speakers often develop the host country's dominant language and their home language simultaneously during their early years, studying their two developing linguistic systems side by side is likely to yield important insights about HL speakers' language development. It is hoped for that these insights will eventually lead to better understandings of not only language competence, but about psycholinguistic process in the acquisition of heritage and other languages.

The FOM approach also offers a way to consider the social context of the multilingual speaker by exploring how multilingual speakers "acquire and use their languages while engaging in language practices that are shaped by the environment" (p. 360). The essential role of the social context in influencing HL development has been repeatedly emphasized by HL researchers (He, 2010). Qualitative analyses of HL speakers' multilingual practices still have much to reveal with respect to themes such as identity, ideology, affiliation, and macro-level power relations.

Finally, FOM has pedagogical applications. First, it can enable more efficient use of resources through the establishment of integrated curricula for languages. Second, it establishes "soft boundaries" between languages that allow learners to engage in multilingual practices such as code-mixing and translanguaging. Cenoz and Gorter contend that such practices are more natural, in that they resemble the way multilinguals talk. Many HL educators and researchers have pointed out the need for developing language curricula that cater to the specific, unique abilities of HL speakers, in lieu of simply grouping HL speakers with other L2 learners. By being especially sensitive to the unique needs of multilingual speakers in educational settings, Focus on Multilingualism might provide a means to coming closer to the goal of an adequate pedagogy for HL speakers.

Conclusion

In light of the current fragmentation that exists in the study of HLs, largely due to the fact that it is a young and growing field, the present discussion has proposed a possible first step that can be taken in helping to unify the field. This first step entails adopting a holistic framework for future research on HLs, namely the FOM approach. Because multiple linguistic systems within one individual are treated as interconnected, and because each system is studied in its own right

instead of as a deficient version of the TL, this approach seems promising for future research in language acquisition as well as multilingual education.

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