

Abstract

A sociolinguistic view of null subjects and VOT in Toronto Heritage Languages

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Multivariate comparison of conversational speech patterns from three generations of Heritage language speakers confirm that, for two linguistic variables, no consistent pattern of either attrition or incomplete acquisition emerges. The primary structure examined, for Heritage Cantonese, Italian and Russian, is variable subject pronoun presence. Neither rate of null subject pronouns nor patterns of most contextual factors conditioning the presence/absence of these pronouns differ by generation since immigration or from available Homeland comparators. A second variable, Voice Onset Time (VOT), is introduced for comparative purposes. Unlike the null subject pattern, this variable shows cross-generational drift toward English norms in Heritage Russian and Ukrainian, while Heritage Italian speakers again show no inter-generational differences. For both variables, lack of correlation with measures of language contact, use and attitude makes it difficult to interpret these patterns of variation as evidence of either incomplete acquisition or attrition. Differing outcomes from those of studies conducted in experimental and elicitation paradigms underline the benefit of multiple methodologies.