

Heritage German case loss and German case acquisition

My research questions are (1) whether case loss over time in heritage German is a mirror image of patterns found in L1 and L2 case acquisition, and (2) how case use correlates with exposure to Standard German, which has a dative-accusative distinction, versus varieties that often do not. The first question provides a heritage acquisition analogue to Jakobson's 'regression hypothesis' for attrition (1941, Johannessen 2014): do heritage communities lose case in the reverse order of acquisitional paths? The second adds sociolinguistic depth to this issue. Language contact clearly correlates with loss of inflectional morphology (O'Neil 1978, Maitz & Németh 2014) and Bentz & Winter (2013) argue specifically that languages with more L2 speakers show more case loss than those with fewer. This fits with evidence that L2 acquisition of case is difficult under the best of circumstances. They extend their discussion to language 'enclaves' (2013:18):

a common finding is that inflectional paradigms are maintained in the first generations after immigration, but in the following generations morphological systems are quickly simplified ... For example, in Texas German, use of the dative went down from 64% to 28.5% (Salmons, 1994: 61) within only one generation. This dramatic change happened when ... a considerable number of parents (Boas, 2009: 349) decided not to speak Texas German with their children. Thus, the children of this variety successively became L1 speakers of English and L2 learners of Texas German ... This opens up the possibility that case loss is at least partly due to imperfect L2 learning.

The present paper pursues this seldom discussed connection to acquisition. (Boas does not actually claim that the last generation of Texas German speakers were L2 learners. L2 learning of heritage varieties is rare, and this view seems to reflect misunderstandings about heritage languages, cf. Rothman & Treffers-Daller 2014.) I draw data from two sources, first a reanalysis of earlier work on Texas German case (TxGm, Salmons 1994 using data from Gilbert 1972) and, second, data from Wisconsin Heritage German (WHG). TxGm patterns form a general mirror image to what is reported for L1 German case acquisition (Tracy 1986, Baten 2011, Bittner 2006), e.g. with dative lost before accusative, dative lost with determiners before pronouns, and lexical dative lost before structural dative.

Analysis of WHG data is just beginning. Bousquette & Rohmann (manuscript) present strong evidence that earlier generations had active control of nominative, accusative and dative, suggesting that the absence of dative reflects case loss in the community over time. Sewell (2014) gives detailed linguistic biographies for many WHG speakers, including those under study. Sewell shows that (1) many were German monolingual until starting school (ca. age 6), with varying exposure to English before school, and (2) they had varying degrees of, often extensive exposure to Standard German. Typically developing German-speaking children have solid command of structural case by age 3, though with variation in the dative (Eisenbeiss et al. 2009). We thus expect WHG speakers exposed to standard-like German until school age to have acquired dative. Initial results suggest that many speakers indeed use the dative in a wide range of grammatical contexts (both structural and lexical) and that exposure to Standard German correlates with command of dative in this population.

In conclusion, initial results support a broad parallel between heritage German case loss and a regression hypothesis. Like Salmons 1994 found for TxGm, exposure to Standard-like German appears to play a central role in the acquisition of dative.

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