

Heritage Korean: The Attrition and Retention of Transitivity Alternation

Heritage languages typically undergo attrition, in which morphology and syntax tend to be particularly susceptible. Previous research has found that paradigms such as tense and aspect, gender, and honorific markers are often leveled in heritage grammars (Montrul, 2002; Polinsky, 2008; Choi, 2003). In the current study, the author investigates receptive competence of transitivity alternation in second-generation Korean heritage speakers, an area that has not been previously explored. In native Korean, verbs that can allow both a transitive and intransitive reading utilize a transitive particle *-i* to mark transitive verbs (e.g., *kkelita* ‘to boil (tr)’) to contrast with its intransitive counterpart, e.g., *kkelta* ‘to boil (intr)’. This particular marker is hypothesized to be susceptible to attrition due to its reduced phonological salience and lack of representation in English, the dominant language for this population. The study tested the hypothesis that English-dominant Korean heritage speakers (KHS) will not retain this transitivity alternation in their attrited Korean.

Three native Korean speakers and 19 Korean heritage speakers were tested on their judgment of four sentence conditions:

- (1) transitive sentences with the *-i* particle,
- (2) transitive sentences without the *-i* particle (ungrammatical),
- (3) intransitive sentences without the *-i* particle, and
- (4) intransitive sentences with the *-i* particle (ungrammatical).

Participants were divided into High and Low groups based on a Korean proficiency self-assessment. Data were collected through a computer-based survey in which participants heard 54 recorded sentences and rated their acceptability on a 5-point Likert scale.¹

Results indicated a significant difference between the four sentence conditions ($F(3, 452)=25.18, p < .0001$) for the KHS overall. However, when the performance of each group (High and Low) for each sentence condition was compared, a significant difference in judgment scores between the groups was found for Condition 1 ($F(1, 112)=10.18, p=.002$) and Condition 4 ($F(1, 112)=4.53, p=.035$). A closer investigation of Condition 1 and Condition 4² means for each group indicated that while High KHS showed moderately strong distinctions with their judgments of Condition 1 ($M=4.31, SD=1.13$) and Condition 4 ($M=2.76, SD=1.54$), the Low KHS showed less extreme judgment scores of Condition 1 ($M=3.55, SD=1.37$) and Condition 4 ($M=3.36, SD=1.23$) (see Figure 1).

From these data we can conclude that while both groups of heritage speakers show competence with Korean transitivity alternation, for the Low KHS, the starkly distinct range of acceptability between transitive and intransitive sentences with *-i* is closing. This may show a certain lack of confidence or lowered proficiency with the comprehension of *-i* particle in Korean. The findings suggest an effect of crosslinguistic influence from a dominant language to the weaker language, which Montrul (2000) showed for second language learners. Further explanations of the cause of the results will be discussed.

¹ Rating of 5 indicated highest acceptability.

² Native speakers were in perfect agreement that Condition 1 was “completely acceptable” (mean rating of 5) and Condition 4 was “completely unacceptable” (mean rating of 1).

Selected References

- Choi, H.-W. (2003). Paradigm leveling in American Korean. *Language Research*, 39(1), 183–204.
- Montrul, S. (2000). Transitivity alternations in L2 acquisition: Toward a modular view of transfer. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 22(2), 229–273.
- Montrul, S. (2002). Incomplete Acquisition and Attrition of Spanish Tense/Aspect Distinctions in Adult Bilinguals. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 5(1), 39–68.
- Polinsky, M. (2008). Gender under Incomplete Acquisition: Heritage Speakers' Knowledge of Noun Categorization. *Heritage Language Journal*, 6(1), 40–71.

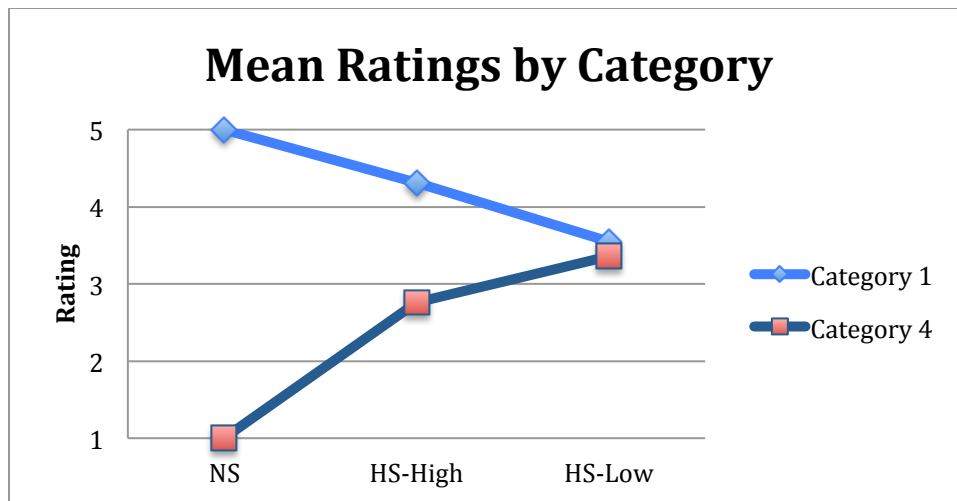


Figure 1. Mean Ratings by Category