Bridging Assessment and Experimental Research in Studying Heritage Languages

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February 2012

Abstract

The field of heritage languages (HL) gains significant benefits when applied and basic research not only overlap but also influence and inspire each other. On the one hand, basic research in HL continues to gather empirical evidence on linguistic deficiencies HL speakers manifest in both production and comprehension and in the wide range of language domains. On the other hand, we face the applied problem of accurately determining what these deficiencies are given individual HL speakers’ age and language experience. In this talk, I will describe a preliminary effort to bridge the two approaches using advanced heritage Russian speakers. We have adapted the Russian Language Assessment (RuLA) instrument for monolingual Russian children (Fotekina and Akhutina, 2002) to test basic knowledge of Russian in young HL adults (N=50). The Bilingual Russian Language Assessment (BiRuLA) consists of 18 receptive and 7 expressive subtests administered electronically. Each participant received a cumulative BiRuLA score and then took part in two eye-tracking experiments that examined their spoken comprehension of Russian morphosyntax. Experiment 1 tested the knowledge of grammatical agreement in gender and number in the VS sentences (e.g., In the sky was flying the silver bird). Experiment 2 explored the interaction of grammatical case and word order in Wh-questions (e.g., Who did the goat save in the pit?). I will discuss accuracy and time course of processing of morphosyntactic features by the participants as reflected in their eye movements and attempt to interpret them in connection with their BiRuLA scores. During the methodological part of the talk, I will describe the Visual World eye-tracking paradigm and demonstrate an ISCAN ELT-500 remote eye-tracker.