

Abstract

Heritage languages are sites of rapid language change, as evidenced by the innovations observed in multiple grammatical domains such as inflectional morphology, case marking, discourse phenomena, etc. However, one domain forms an exception to this by exhibiting stability - core syntax. Ongoing research in the field is focused on defining the bounds of what constitutes core syntax for heritage grammars. This dissertation takes the idea forward by placing core syntax in a grammatical domain that has been established as vulnerable across language acquisition contexts - gender features and gender agreement.

Such a juxtaposition of the reported stability of core syntax and the volatility of gender features in heritage grammars allows this dissertation to explore the ramifications for the structural representation of gender features in heritage grammars. The question is addressed in three ways: (i) Gender assignment to nouns (ii) Dependent marking of gender, or gender agreement (iii) Gender features interacting with structural aspects like possession.

The empirical core of the dissertation is formed by Tamil (Dravidian) acquired as a heritage language in New Delhi. Through a series of picture-description and sentence elicitation tasks, this dissertation examines if heritage Tamil converges to or diverges from the baseline in terms of the structural representations of gender in these domains.

In the domain of gender assignment to nouns, the approach adopted to gender is a configurational one; this dissertation shows that gender features encode representational differences in terms of their location (lexical vs functional heads) and assignment strategies (inherent vs discourse-obtained). Novel empirical evidence from heritage Tamil points towards sensitivity towards these: lexical gender assignment remains stable whereas gender assignment that involves discourse elements undergoes variation in heritage Tamil.

In the domain of gender agreement in adjectives, the dissertation first lays out the structural representation of adjectives, which are also configurational in Tamil. The structure of adjectives requires the application of two mutually exclusive strategies of adjective formation, thus requiring intensive, case-by-case learning. Further, predicative adjectives, to the exclusion of attributive adjectives, participate in agreement relations with nouns. Data from heritage Tamil shows two broad trends: the mechanisms underlying gender agreement on adjectives remain stable, whereas adjective formation shows variation.

The third domain explored in this dissertation is gender and its interaction with possessives. Nouns carrying gender features are disallowed from occurring in the configuration of predicative possession. This constraint is explained as a result of the functional heads involved in possession and their incompatibility with gender features in Tamil. Evidence from heritage Tamil shows that the core structural properties of gender remain stable. The structural constraint is retained in heritage Tamil.

To conclude, this dissertation identifies three grammatical domains where the core-syntactic aspects of gender features remain stable in heritage Tamil. The broad implication of these findings is that we can argue for syntax emerging as a resilient grammatical phenomenon despite the presence of reduced/ restricted primary linguistic data and potential transfer effects from other languages in the environment.