Kannst du mir sagen wost wohnst? Structure and acquisition of C-agr in Wisconsin Heritage German

Joshua Bousquette *University of Georgia*

This presentation examines the learnability of complementizer agreement (C-agr) in Wisconsin Heritage German (WHG), a set of moribund, non-standard varieties of German spoken in eastern Wisconsin. Applying a feature-based approach, I argue that the extension of an overt agreement structure in the CP domain from main to subordinate clauses brings about clausal symmetry, reducing the number of domain-specific structures language learners must acquire. In a variety with a V2 constraint like WHG, this results in a minimally complex derivation and maximally 'transparent' structure (Lightfoot 1979). As such, I account for the maintenance of C-agr in WHG through as many as five generations beyond immigration.

C-agr is a positional rather than lexical phenomenon; any element in the CP domain may host agreement (Bousquette 2013: 108-122). Data from interviews conducted with speakers of WHG in eastern Wisconsin in 2011-2013 exhibit morphological distribution and phonetic realization of C-agr consistent with late 19th and early 20th century attestations of multiple varieties of Franconian (Bousquette 2013: 68-75). Analysis of immigration and US census records confirms that many of the WHG speakers that exhibit C-agr trace direct ancestry to these regions, suggesting the maintenance of C-agr structures from immigration through minimally 3-5 subsequent generations.

In a feature-based approach, C-agr develops historically through the reanalysis of C as a probe with u-phi features, either through a process of feature economy and language internal processes (van Gelderen 2011: 82) or through a reanalysis of surface forms as innovative inflection specific to C (Bousquette 2013: 35-40, 142). The resultant agreement structure in subordinate clauses parallels the agreement structure already extant in main clauses of C-oriented V2 languages, in which the finite verb moves to C rather than to T (van Gelderen 2011: 81). As a result of this leveling, the [u-phi] at C in both main and subordinate clauses probe the maximally local subject XP at spec,TP for [i-phi]. Clausal symmetry in agreement structures reduces the number of domain-specific structures language learners must acquire, thereby increasing learnability of a maximally transparent grammar. The maintenance of non-standard agreement structures in a heritage community with then be discussed in light of recent work that claims that these varieties are 'incompletely acquired' (Montrul 2008) or lacking in 'complexity' (Benmamoun et al. 2010).

References

Benmamoun, E., Montrul, S. & Polinsky, M. (2010). White paper: Prolegomena to Heritage Linguistics. http://scholar.harvard.edu/mpolinsky/publications/white-paper-prolegomenaheritage-linguistics.

Bousquette, Joshua. 2013. *Complementizer Agreement in Modern Varieties of West Germanic: A model of reanalysis and renewal.* Madison, WI: PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Gelderen, Elly van. 2011. *The Linguistic Cycle: Language change and the language faculty.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lightfoot, David. 1979. *Principles of Diachronic Syntax.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Montrul, Silvina. 2008. *Incomplete Acquisition in Bilingualism: Re-examining the age factor.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.