Topic vs. case marking in Japanese and Korean: Comparing heritage speakers and second language learners

Heritage speakers (HSs) are subtractive bilinguals natively exposed to a minority language in childhood, but dominant in the societal majority language. Research suggests that HSs show unequal deficits at different levels of linguistic representations; e.g., they have few phonological problems but strong morphosyntactic deficits, particularly evident for speakers at the lower end of the proficiency continuum (Montrul, 2002; Polinsky, 2007). In high proficiency HSs, discourse-level phenomena remain difficult despite otherwise target-like performance on phenomena mediated in the grammar (Laleko, 2010). HSs also exhibit a tendency toward redundancy and over-marking (in comprehension and production), consistently preferring overt elements to null elements (Polinsky, 1995).

In this paper, we examine topic (TOP) and nominative (NOM) marking in heritage Japanese and Korean, two typologically similar languages that organize syntax around information structure. Both languages have a dedicated TOP projection (Japanese *wa,* Korean *(n)un*). The TOP marker appears instead of NOM (*ga, -ka/-i*) when the referent of a DP is interpreted as an anaphoric, generic, or contrastive topic in the main clause. In embedded clauses, TOP-marked DPs are interpreted only as contrastive. Both languages allow for the omission of markers in informal registers under certain structural and discourse-pragmatic conditions (Kuno, 1973; Tomioka, 2010).

We address two general questions:

(i) Which linguistic sub-modules are most vulnerable in HSs and why? More specifically, are discourse-level phenomena more difficult than phenomena mediated within narrow syntax?

(ii) Are null elements associated with more difficulty than those overtly expressed?

Regarding (i), If HSs have general morphosyntactic deficits, we expect equal difficulty with NOM and TOP; if their problems arise from the syntax-discourse interface (Laleko, 2010; Polinsky, 2006), all conditions involving TOP should be more difficult; if the problems are associated with contexts that allow for optionality, we expect difficulty with TOP in matrix clauses only.

Regarding (ii), If preference for overt elements is a consistent property of heritage grammars, we predict greater accuracy on conditions involving overt markers than on conditions involving omissions.

We examined acceptability ratings for 56 sentences for each language, elicited on Amazon Mechanical Turk, by comparing three sets of conditions: (a) acceptable uses of TOP/NOM (1); (b) misuses of markers (NOM instead of TOP and vice versa) (2); (c) acceptable/ unacceptable particle omissions (3).

(1) a. Sakana-wa   tai-ga   oisii.
       fish-TOP   snapper-NOM delicious
       'Speaking of fish, red snapper is delicious'
    b. [Mari-wa   kita-to]   Erika-ga   sinzite-iru
       Mari-TOP   came-COMP Erika-NOM   believe-PRES
       'Erica believes that MARI [not others] came.'

(2)   Watashi-wa   hudan   hougaku   -wa /*ga   kikimasu
        I   -TOP   usual   Japanese music-TOP/*NOM
        ga   yougaku   -wa/*ga   kiki -masen
        but   western music-TOP/*NOM   listen –NEG
        'I usually listen to Japanese music but I do not listen to Western music.'

(3)   Kouta -wa   [Mai *(ga) tsukut –ta]   keiki   tabe -ta
         Kouta –TOP Mai-NOM make –PAST   cake   eat   -PAST
        'Kouta ate the cake [which Mai made].'

30 adult Japanese HSs and 36 Korean HSs, from various countries of residence, took the experiment; based on their ability to read the original scripts and on their biographical data, they qualify as higher-proficiency speakers. Since there is a lingering question whether heritage grammars are similar to advanced L2 ones, we also included L2 learners of Japanese (N=36) and Korean (N=13), in addition to monolingual controls (Japanese N=13, Korean N=14).

Although they outperform L2s on identifying correct and incorrect use of TOP/NOM, HSs in both languages have greater difficulty with TOP in matrix clauses. This preference for NOM instead of TOP can be explained by appealing to economy considerations: the projection of a NOM DP requires less structure than the projection of TopP. However, HSs do not have problems with contrastive topics in embeddings, which argues against the generalized deficit at the syntax-discourse interface.

HSs in both languages also have significantly more difficulty with null marking than with the overtly expressed markers. This corroborates previous observations on the general difficulty of null elements for HSs. We propose that the absence of overt marking leads to excessive ambiguity for HSs, which takes them above the threshold of efficient processing.

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