

Person features, Nominal Structures, and Inalienable Possession in Heritage Bilinguals

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In most Romance languages, in structures such as (1), an inalienable object (Guerón, 1985, Vergnaud & Zubizarreta, 1992) *la cabeza* ‘the head’ projects an external possessor structure involving a preverbal clitic with person features *me* (1st person). In (2), the alienable object *el auto* does not project an external possessor structure, there is no preverbal clitic and there are no person features.

- (1) Me lav-é la cabeza
1.S wash-1.S.PST DEF.FEM head
“I washed my head.”
- (2) Lav-é el auto
wash-1.S.PST DEF.M car
“I washed the car.”

Unlike Romance languages, English inalienable nouns project an external possessor structure that requires person features but only internally to the DP:

- (4) I washed my/*the hand.

This talk focuses on the representation of person in nominal structures with inalienable and alienable nouns among Heritage Spanish-English bilinguals. The main proposal is that the structure in (1) involves a low applicative headed by a preverbal clitic (Cuervo, 2003), while the structure in (2) does not. Though person features are required in inalienable possession structures in English and Spanish as shown in ((3) and (4)), only in Spanish AppP headed by person features projects.

- (3) [TP me lavé [vP [VP [lavé [AppP [App me [DP la cabeza]]]]]]

- (4) [TP I [T [vP [VP washed [DP my head]]]]

Heritage speakers (HSs) often exhibit variability both in production (e.g., alternating between “target” and “non-target” forms) and comprehension (e.g., flexible patterns in acceptability judgments) of heritage language (HL) grammatical properties (Montrul, 2016). Despite the prevalence of this finding, however, it remains unclear (a) what causes HSs to exhibit such variability and (b) what this variability reveals about HSs’ underlying grammatical knowledge. One possible approach to these questions, which we adapt in the present study, is the Feature Activation Hypothesis (Putnam & Sánchez, 2013), according to which HS variability in production and comprehension is the result of morphosyntactic feature reassembly driven by HSs’ reduced activation of HL functional features.

Following the Feature Activation Hypothesis, we expect that (a) *lower* proficiency HSs of Spanish will exhibit *more* variability in the production of the applicative structure than higher proficiency HSs, due to their reduced activation of the HL, and (b) HSs as a whole will exhibit *more variability in production* (Experiment 1) than in comprehension (Experiment 2), largely due to the relatively higher difficulties of mapping features onto the syntax in oral production.

To test these hypotheses, 16 advanced-proficiency HSs (AdvHSs), 14 intermediate- proficiency HSs (IntHSs) and 15 Spanish-dominant controls (SDCs) completed two experiments. In Experiment 1, participants described pictures with inalienable and alienable objects. Like the SDCs, both HS groups were more likely to produce clitics with inalienable objects than alienable objects (all *p*’s < .001), thereby showing knowledge of person features as heads of the AppP projection. Nonetheless, in the inalienable object condition, both the AdvHSs and the IntHSs produced a substantial proportion (AdvHSs: 19.3%; IntHSs: 66.7%) of innovative, “non-target” variants (e.g., (5)-(7)), which we interpret as evidence of feature remapping from English to Spanish.

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|-----|--------------|----------|--------|--------|
| (5) | Me | lav-é | mi | cabeza |
| | 1.S | wash-1.S | 1.S | head |
| (6) | Lavé | mi | cabeza | |
| | wash-1.S.PST | 1.S | head | |
| (7) | Lavé | la | cabeza | |
| | wash-1.S.PST | DEF | head | |

In Experiment 2, participants used a 1-4 scale to rate “target” forms of inalienable possession, such as (1), as well as “non-target” variants ((5), (6)). Though the HS groups were more accepting of variant (6), which lacks the preverbal clitic, than the SDCs (p 's < .05), they were still more likely to accept target forms than non-target forms (p 's < .01), thereby showing reduced variability in a receptive task, as expected under the Activation Hypothesis.

References

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