

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the grammar of American-English heritage speakers in Israel, focusing on phonological and morphosyntactic phenomena relevant to the contact between English and Hebrew.

Heritage speakers are, by definition, bilingual speakers. Like other bilinguals, they are naturally exposed (either simultaneously or sequentially) to two languages. However, what characterizes them as a unique group of speakers are the circumstances of acquisition, and the status of their acquired languages with respect to each other: one language is an ethno-minority language spoken at home, while the other is the dominant language of the societal majority. The proficiency of these speakers in their home-language, referred to as the *heritage language*, is largely dependent on a combination of factors. These include the nature of the input they receive (both quantitatively and qualitatively), personal circumstances of acquisition (i.e. chronological age and age of exposure to both the heritage and the societal-dominant language), formal schooling in the heritage language (or lack thereof), linguistic properties of the specific languages in contact, as well as extralinguistic factors related to the cultural status and relative prestige of both languages, inter alia.

The interaction between the above factors yields a highly heterogeneous group of speakers who exhibit variable linguistic profiles, and as such provide valuable observations that shed light from a multidisciplinary perspective on issues pertaining to the nature of linguistic knowledge and acquisition. The contribution of heritage language research is therefore widely acknowledged in fields extending from theoretical linguistics to psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics (Montrul 2016).

While the majority of studies conducted on heritage speakers focus on ethnic minority languages in an English-dominant environment, my study examines English as the heritage language in a Hebrew-dominant environment. I compare three groups of speakers: American-English heritage speakers, monolingual American-English speakers, and Hebrew-native late learners of English. The experimental tasks were designed to target phonological and morphosyntactic properties that are relevant to the English-Hebrew contact and have been shown to be affected in other cases of language contact.

The phonological investigation consisted of a vowel production experiment. As English dialects vary mostly in their vowels (Labov et al. 2006, Ladefoged & Ferrari Disner 2012), vowel production is likely to be indicative of variation that could contribute to a ‘heritage accent’. The morphosyntactic data were obtained using spontaneous speech elicitation tasks targeting prepositions, number agreement and gender assignment.

The findings showed that heritage speakers differed from both English monolingual speakers and Hebrew-native late learners of English, and they exhibited different patterns with respect to the two modules assessed. In some aspects heritage speakers exhibited similar systems to the monolingual English speakers (e.g. they retained the same number of vowel categories), while some systems were shown to be structurally different (e.g. heritage speakers exhibited a three-way gender system while monolingual English speakers displayed a binary system). Gender was found to be the most vulnerable domain, and among influencing factors observed were input availability, overt-morphological marking, universal tendencies, and most evident – transfer from Hebrew.

Although Hebrew transfer was shown to be the most prominent influencing factor on morphosyntactic performance (witnessed in all three experimental tasks), there was no indication of transfer from Hebrew in the phonological system. This observation stands in

contrast to previous findings from the study of the vowel system of heritage-Russian speakers in Israel (Asherov et al. 2016).

I argue that the evident resistance of the vowel system of English heritage speakers to the effects of Hebrew can be attributed to the relative prestige and status of English in Israel.

The contribution of the study is thus twofold: It examines the relatively understudied vulnerability of English compared to other heritage languages, as well as providing an opportunity to evaluate the interaction between linguistic and extralinguistic factors in a setting in which both the majority language and the heritage language are considered socially and culturally prestigious.