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Determining the suppressibility of functional categories in second-language acquisition: from Spanish to Palenquero

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Are some languages easier to learn than others? This question, one that most linguists would find naive, is frequently heard among would-be language learners. Often associated with more “difficult” languages is grammatical agreement, e.g. verb conjugation and noun-adjective gender and number, whose forms and rules seem to represent a net increase in complexity over languages that lack agreement. And yet, as one scholar remarks, “Non-native speakers [...] will readily appreciate this demand. But most native speakers will hardly be aware that it exists at all; to them [...] agreement usually comes for free.” But does it? And if so, how can systems that stymie learners be so easy for native speakers? In principle the most effective way to determine the real-time complexity of grammatical agreement would be to “turn it off” and determine whether speakers experience any sort of “relief.” Naturally, an integral component of language such as agreement cannot be voluntarily deactivated, but given the proper combination of languages and an appropriate population of native speakers and learners it may be possible to indirectly explore the seemingly paradoxical fact that agreement appears effortless for native speakers but burdensome for all but the most proficient learners.

This research project focuses on bilingual speakers of two languages with highly similar vocabularies and sentence structures, one of which exhibits several forms of agreement and the other of which does not. The languages are Spanish and the creole language Palenquero, spoken in the Afro-Colombian village of San Basilio de Palenque. Although they are not mutually intelligible, Palenquero grammar is in many respects a proper subset of Spanish, lacking grammatical inflection on nouns, adjectives, and verbs and accompanying agreement. In order to speak Palenquero without interference from Spanish, the bilingual speaker has to suppress grammatical agreement while producing essentially the same noun and verb phrases with the same basic words. Recent language-revitalization efforts have resulted in a cohort of native Spanish speakers who have acquired Palenquero as a second language. This study will include psycholinguistic experiments with first- and second-language speakers of Palenquero to test the suppressibility of agreement. In addition, by demonstrating that historically stigmatized languages can play a crucial role in addressing significant issues in linguistics, this study will aid in efforts to legitimize other languages and peoples struggling for acceptance.