

PROJECT SUMMARY

Adult second-language acquisition is often marked by incomplete mastery of morphosyntactic agreement in fashions that cannot be fully explained by the failure to learn individual morphemes: the functional categories and syntactic mechanisms responsible for agreement must also be acquired. The discussion of the role of functional categories during second-language acquisition has focused on learnability of new categories and ultimate attainment, but there has been little discussion of the opposite question: whether a natively acquired functional category can be completely suppressed during second-language acquisition. Since research suggests that certain types of morphological inflection carry an additional processing cost, and also that bilinguals are not able to fully inhibit the language not in use, determining the susceptibility of functional categories to suppression can contribute to knowledge of the relative costs associated with first-language transfer as opposed to morphological simplification, and consequently bears directly on the question of ultimate attainment in a second language. The present proposal takes capitalizes on a unique opportunity provided by the Afro-Colombian village of San Basilio de Palenque where the Spanish-lexified creole language Palenquero is in contact with Spanish. Palenquero morphosyntax is a proper subset of Spanish: there is no morphological inflection for nominal gender or number or verb-subject agreement, although the two languages share a largely cognate lexicon. Recent language-revitalization efforts have resulted in a generation of young native speakers of Spanish who are second-language speakers of Palenquero; there are also attriting native Palenquero speakers who share many of the same traits as second-language learners. Based on promising pilot studies, psycholinguistic experiments will be conducted with first- and second-language speakers of Palenquero to test the suppressibility of functional categories responsible for agreement.

Intellectual merit: This project provides an innovative research environment in which answers to the following questions can be sought: (1) Assuming that adult second-language acquisition often involves incomplete agreement paradigms, what sort of “incomplete” paradigms result when learning a second language whose inflectional morphology is in effect an “incomplete” subset of the first language? (2) If language attrition typically includes the simplification of inflectional paradigms, what sort of “simplification” of the recessive language’s morphology is at stake when its morphology is already “simpler” than that of the dominant language? Answering both questions promises to provide crucial pieces in the puzzle of ultimate attainability in second-language acquisition by determining the effects of already acquired functional categories. Because the acquisition of new categories is not at stake, this project can address substantive issues without entering into the debate over the existence of and access to Universal Grammar. The investigation will employ experimental procedures previously applied only in laboratory settings, modified and adapted for a field setting with non-literate participants who have not been exposed to prescriptive grammar teaching and who have no familiarity with social and psychological research methodology. This will provide a tool-kit for in situ psycholinguistic research in non-canonical speech communities as well as allowing for the study of language in the absence of factors often taken for granted in laboratory-based studies.

Broader impact. In adding a new dimension—psycholinguistic research—to creole language and Afro-diasporic studies, this project embodies a call to arms for a greater appreciation of the scientific research potential of sociolinguistically marginalized and under-represented speech communities. By showing that data from historically stigmatized languages spoken in a poor Afro-descendent village can play a crucial role in addressing major issues in language acquisition, this study will aid in efforts to legitimize other languages and peoples struggling for acceptance. The experimental data will also contribute to the demonstration that language switching among bilingual speakers reflects implicit psycholinguistic knowledge rather than unprincipled confusion. The project will supplement Penn State’s superb graduate student preparation in experimental psycholinguistics with training and practice in a field setting.