

Simplification and complexification processes in language contact: Evidence from the Romani-Spanish bilinguals in Mexico

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Several studies show that English L2 learners of Spanish generalize *ser* ‘to be’ before acquiring *estar* ‘to be’ (e.g., Geeslin 2001) as a result of conceptual transfer from the L1 to the L2 (Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008 for an overview). In turn, Silva-Corvalán (1986) noted that heritage speakers of Spanish in the US generalize *estar* faster than Spanish monolinguals in the Americas, and argued that this was most likely the result of general cognitive processes leading to simplification of alternatives among bilinguals rather than conceptual transfer.

In this talk I will discuss the role of conceptual transfer and simplification processes among bilinguals in heritage Mexican Romani (Indic) and Mexican Spanish (Romance) by examining copula choice in both languages. First, I will present evidence showing that, whereas Romani speakers from Europe utilize a single copula (Matras 2002, Elšik and Matras 2006), speakers of Mexican Romani distinguish between attributive predications using the copula *si*, as in (1a), and the third person subject clitic pronouns, as in (1b).

- (1) a. le fave muṣa bibiake si barbale
 DEF.PL children POSS.1SG aunt.DAT be.3PL rich
 ‘My aunt’s children are rich.’ (Adamou 2013: 1085)
- b. o raklo=**lo** felis
 DEF.M boy=3SG.M happy
 ‘The boy is happy.’ (Adamou 2013: 1075)

In Adamou (2013) I argued that this development was due to conceptual transfer from Spanish, leading to the complexification of the Romani language while simplifying matters for the bilinguals by establishing a parallel between the conceptual representations of the two languages.

I will then present findings from a recent study that investigates whether the same simplification processes than the ones reported in Silva-Corvalán (1986) are also found in the Spanish copula choice of the Romani-Spanish bilinguals from Mexico (Adamou et al. forthcoming). To allow for comparability with previous studies, we used the contextualized copula choice task designed by Geeslin and Guijarro-Fuentes (2008). 60 Mexican Romani-Spanish bilinguals responded to the questionnaire in both Spanish and Romani, and 60 Mexican Spanish monolinguals responded in Spanish. Generalized linear mixed effects models were constructed to analyze the results. The Mexican Spanish findings support Silva-Corvalán’s (1986) hypothesis that bilinguals generalize *estar* faster than monolinguals, and that conceptual transfer is not the driving factor.

Finally, I will discuss what the implications of these studies are regarding the contexts where simplification and complexification processes arise in extended language contact.

References

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