How to measure lexical proficiency in heritage speakers of Russian and Polish in Germany?

A comparison of different experimental approaches

Bernhard Brehmer, Tatjana Kurbangulova & Marcin Wiński (University of Greifswald)

brehmerb@uni-greifswald.de

Lexical proficiency is generally considered to be a crucial point in rating the language competence of bilinguals. Therefore, language attrition studies (cf. Schmid 2011 and many others) as well as studies on heritage languages (cf., e.g. Polinsky & Kagan 2007) often make use of experimental tasks that are designed to tap lexical knowledge in the involved languages. In most cases, only one specific task is used to shed light on lexical proficiency in the supposed weaker language (e.g. a picture description task, a semantic fluency task etc.). For an ongoing research project on language competence of heritage speakers of Russian and Polish living in Germany we expose our informants to a whole battery of different tasks which all aim at establishing a measure of lexical proficiency in the Slavic heritage language (Russian or Polish), but also in the surrounding language German. We plan to test not only the heritage speakers themselves (i.e. representatives of the second generation of immigrants who were already born in Germany), but also their parents in order to get an impression about the richness of lexical input the heritage speakers (potentially) receive at home in their heritage language and in German. The purpose of our presentation for the workshop is to compare the results of the different experimental tasks with one another, but also to other indices of lexical diversity (e.g. type-token frequencies) that were calculated on the basis of the performance of heritage speakers in other tasks. These additional data are taken from an elicited oral narrative where a picture story is used as a stimulus and from a written task where the informants are asked to deliver a written construction manual of a boomerang in the heritage language and in German. As for the specific experimental tasks that were designed to get data on the lexical proficiency of the tested informants, they include:

- a word-list/vocabulary task where the informants are asked to translate a list of basic, but also more complex words from German to the heritage language and vice versa (cf. the Swadesh list used by Polinsky 2006 to estimate lexical proficiency in heritage speakers of Russian in the US)

- a picture naming task

- a semantic mapping task which serves as a standardized test to measure lexical proficiency in German (CFT-20R, cf. Weiß 2006)

- a semantic fluency task in controlled association (cf. Schmid 2011)

As these tasks approach the problem of lexical proficiency from different perspectives, our main aim of the presentation is to compare, whether these experimental tasks, when exposed to the same group of informants, yield the same or comparable results regarding the internal ranking of our informants. We thus hope to answer the question whether these tasks (or which of these) represent a reliable means of estimating lexical proficiency of heritage speakers in the heritage language and in the surrounding language (in our case German).

References:

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