

DIFFERENTIAL OBJECT MARKING AND DIACHRONIC INCREMENTATION IN CHILD HERITAGE ROMANIAN

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Abstract. In contemporary Romanian, differential object marking is undergoing a change from a system allowing two marking patterns in optional contexts to a system which preserves only one of these patterns. In the present study we verify if child heritage speakers opt for the novel system at a level beyond the one in the input. The data come from 34 narratives by 7- and 10-year-old heritage speakers of Romanian living in France, compared to 34 narratives by monolingual children living in the homeland, 11 adult first generation immigrants from France and 10 Romanian adults from Romania. The findings suggest that language change is not advanced in a heritage language acquisition scenario when the change is found in the weaker language and targets a phenomenon at the syntax-discourse interface.

Keywords: differential object marking, variable input, diachronic incrementation, heritage Romanian

1. INTRODUCTION

In the generative literature, the view that language acquisition is the locus of language change (Lightfoot 1979, 1999, Roberts and Biberauer 2016) is uncontroversial. Children acquire grammars which may differ from the one of the previous generation and, under conditions of instability, they opt for the innovative option. When the input provides two variants, there can be an increase in use of the novel variant beyond the level attested in the input, and “diachronic incrementation” obtains (Labov 2007, Cournane 2019). Incrementation can be reflected, among other things, in increase in frequency or extent. Given the widespread assumption that simultaneous bilingual language acquisition (2L1) “leads to a kind of grammatical competence which does not differ qualitatively from that of the respective monolingual L1 learners” (Meisel 2011), the prediction would be that, when acquiring a language which is undergoing some change, 2L1 acquirers would also opt for the innovative variant.

The present study looks at whether, under conditions of language change, diachronic incrementation is attested in child heritage language acquisition, i.e. under conditions of

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language contact. And, if it is attested, whether it is similar to what is found in L1 acquisition. We investigate the acquisition of differential object marking (DOM) (Bossong 1998) by child heritage speakers (HS) of Romanian in a context in which the societal language is French. DOM in Romanian offers a perfect test case for exploring to what extent language change can be advanced via child generalization patterns irrespective of the learning scenario. In contemporary Romanian, two DOM grammars are competing, with one of them clearly gaining ground (Avram and Zafiu 2017, Hill and Mardale 2021, among many others). The investigation of DOM in heritage Romanian offers the opportunity to study incrementation in a context in which the language change is already under way and the direction of the shift is categorical: from a grammar which allows two marking patterns to a grammar which preserves only one of them.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the main properties of DOM in contemporary Romanian, with a focus on the change which this system is undergoing and on the predictions for language acquisition in a variable input context. Section 3 presents a preliminary exploration of the acquisition of DOM in child heritage Romanian on the basis of a corpus of “frog story” narratives. DOM use by child HSs is compared to DOM use by adult native Romanian-speakers living in France (first generation immigrants), by adult native speakers of Romanian living in the homeland, as well as to DOM use by monolingual children acquiring Romanian in the homeland. The conclusions are summarized in Section 4.

2. DOM IN ROMANIAN: A CHANGING SYSTEM

2.1. Romanian DOM in a nutshell: Predictions for language acquisition

DOM refers to the process whereby direct objects which have certain semantic and/or pragmatic features (such as animacy, definiteness, topicality, etc.) are “differentially marked” either with overt case markers or by being placed in designated syntactic positions (Bossong 1991, 1998, Aissen 2003, Iemmolo 2010, Iemmolo and Klump 2014).

In Romanian, the DOM marker is *pe*, illustrated in (1a). It precedes the marked object⁴. But *pe* is in competition with clitic doubling: the object can be marked by *pe* and doubled by an Accusative clitic (AC) whose *phi*-features agree with the *pe*-marked DP (illustrated in 1b):

- (1) a. Vasile a desenat *pe* copil.
 Vasile has drawn DOM child
 ‘Vasile drew the child.’
 b. Vasile I- a desenat *pe* copil.
 Vasile CL.3M.S has drawn DOM child
 ‘Vasile drew the child.’

In what follows, we will refer to the marking in (1a) as “single *pe*” and to the marking in (1b) as “*pe* + AC”. These two markers do not have the same contribution to the

⁴ The DP is interpreted as definite but the definite article must be omitted with *pe* in the absence of a modifier.

meaning of the sentence. Only the latter is sensitive to discourse topicality (Farkas and von Heusinger 2003). This may derive from the fact that there is a division of labour between the AC and *pe*. The AC acts as an anchor for new assertions, i.e. it signals that the marked object is a discourse-linked topic, whereas *pe* signals prominence of the argument in event structure (Avram and Coene 2009, Hill and Mardale 2021).

It is precisely this competition which is at the core of the scenario of instability which will be presented in this section. But we will first offer a brief presentation of the DOM system in Romanian, at a very descriptive level, with a focus on the predictions for language acquisition. Importantly, the description is far from being exhaustive⁵. It is narrowed down to the data relevant to the analysis of the acquisition of DOM in the present study. The change in progress will be addressed in the second part of this section.

In Romanian, one identifies obligatory and optional DOM contexts⁶. DOM is obligatory with direct objects which are animate proper names, as seen in (2), and definite pronouns (irrespective of animacy), as in (3), where the demonstrative can have both an animate and an inanimate antecedent.

- (2) a. Vasile a desenat-*(o) *(pe) Oana.
 Vasile has drawn CL.3F.S DOM Oana
 ‘Vasile drew Oana.’
 b. Vasile *(l-) a desenat (*pe) Paris.
 Vasile CL.3M.S has drawn DOM Paris
 ‘Vasile drew Paris.’
- (3) L- am desenat pe acela de-acolo.
 CL.3M.S have drawn DOM that-the of there
 ‘I drew the one over there.’

With lexical DPs, DOM is syntactically optional. Generally, DOM applies only to animate direct objects (Farkas and von Heusinger 2003, Mardale 2007, 2008, among many others).

- (4) Am vizitat (pe) copilul de la parter.
 have visited DOM child-the of at first.floor
 ‘I visited the child who lives on the first floor.’
- (5) Am desenat (*pe) banca din parc.
 have drawn DOM bench-the from park
 ‘I drew the bench in the park.’

Both definite and (specific) indefinite DPs can be marked, but marking of the latter is rare. In many cases the presence of DOM with indefinite objects may induce a specific interpretation (Dobrovie-Sorin 1990).

⁵ For detailed presentations of the Romanian DOM system, the reader is referred to Farkas and von Heusinger (2003), Mardale (2007, 2008), Tigău (2011, 2014), Hill and Mardale (2017, 2019, 2021), Irimia (2020), among many others.

⁶ This presentation is limited to the main obligatory DOM contexts, which are directly relevant for the analysis of the acquisition data in our study.

- (6) (O) caut (pe) o fată.
 CL.3F.S look DOM a girl
 ‘I am looking for a girl.’

Summing up, in Romanian DOM is obligatory with (animate) proper names and (animate/inanimate) definite pronouns. With these DPs DOM equals *pe* + AC and contributes no discourse effect. In terms of language acquisition, this pattern has all the ingredients of early emergence and early target-like use. With (animate) lexical DPs, DOM is syntactically optional. Additionally, whether marking is single *pe* or *pe* + AC is also a matter of optionality. In optional contexts, DOM use has discourse effects (Hill and Mardale 2019, 2021); it is a property at the syntax-pragmatics interface. It has all the ingredients of delayed acquisition: it involves optionality (which translates into variable input), and it is constrained by discourse features such as topicality. Phenomena at the syntax-pragmatics interface have been argued to be vulnerable in acquisition, especially in bilingual and L2 learning contexts (Sorace 2004, 2011, Tsimpli and Sorace 2006, Sorace and Filiaci 2006, a.m.o.). These can be affected by input quantity and consistency and may be subject to cross-linguistic interference and L1 attrition. Optional DOM has the potential for language change as well. According to Longobardi’s (2001:278) Inertia Theory, syntax is not likely to change unless the change originates “as an interface phenomenon”. Optional DOM in Romanian *is* an interface phenomenon.

2.2. Romanian DOM and language change

The Romanian DOM system is undergoing a diachronic change from single *pe* to an increase in the use of *pe* and AC in optional contexts (Dobrovie-Sorin 1990, Chiriacescu and von Heusinger 2009, Hill and Mardale 2019, 2021). Avram and Zafiu (2017) and Avram (2019) provided experimental results from acceptability judgment tasks which revealed that there are two parallel DOM systems available: in optional contexts, some speakers, “the innovatives”, accept exclusively *pe* + AC as DOM. Other speakers, “the conservatives”, allow both single *pe* and *pe* + AC (see the examples in (7) and (8) below). The phenomenon is not age-related, since the two groups are identified in Avram (2019), a study which involved only 19–21-year-old participants.

- (7) the “conservative” DOM system
- a. Am desenat pe copil. [single *pe* = yes]
 have drawn DOM child
 - b. L- am desenat pe copil. [*pe* + AC = yes]
 CL.3M.S have drawn DOM child
 ‘I drew the child.’
- (8) the “innovative” DOM system
- a. Am desenat pe copil. [single *pe* = no]
 have drawn DOM child
 - b. L- am desenat pe copil. [*pe* + AC = yes]
 CL.3M.S have drawn DOM child
 ‘I drew the child.’

The diachronic change is not necessarily reflected in increase in frequency but in extension. The “innovative” system has eliminated one option, single *pe*, and resorts exclusively to *pe* + AC as DOM with all DP types (not only with pronouns and proper names).

2.3. Predictions for diachronic incrementation in DOM acquisition

In the present study diachronic incrementation simply refers to an increase in the use of the innovative grammar, to the detriment of the “weakening” one, in scenarios in which the system is using two competing grammars. The core idea is that in the acquisition process children can make (over)generalizations which, under certain conditions, will boost language change, i.e. the child creates a grammar which goes beyond the one in the input. This seems to be uncontroversial in the literature, as is the view that language acquisition drives language variation and language change (Biberauer 2019, Biberauer and Roberts 2017, Cournane 2019). It is, however, equally uncontroversial that language acquisition is not always innovative and overgeneralization is not the only attested phenomenon which can lead to diachronic change. An impressive number of studies have revealed a clear preference for economy during the early stage of language acquisition, reflected, among others, in diachronic undergeneralization (see, for example, Westergaard 2019 for a discussion along this line). Children can be conservative as well.

If it is true that in learning scenarios which involve two competing systems children opt for the innovative grammar advancing language change, the expectation would be that children acquiring Romanian should show a bias for the innovative option, i.e. for the exclusive use of *pe* + AC. Single *pe* configurations should be more rarely used than in the input and, comparatively, more rarely than *pe* + AC in child speech. The innovative option, however, includes a marker which signals familiar topicality, i.e. a discourse-related feature. DOM use depends on the integration of available information into discourse. And as mentioned in the previous section, properties at the interface between syntax and pragmatics are generally vulnerable in bilingual language acquisition. In addition, the innovative variant is a clitic doubling configuration which has been shown to be vulnerable both in monolingual and in bilingual acquisition (Torrens and Wexler 2000, Prévost 2006, Grüter and Crago 2012, Vender et al. 2018). Irrespective of the theoretical analysis that one adopts for clitic and clitic doubling configurations, there is consensus with respect to the computational complexity involved. The dependency relation between the clitic and the associated nominal is affected by language external factors, such as processing abilities and working memory. This predicts a delay in the incrementation of *pe* + AC.

Investigating the acquisition of DOM in a context in which one of the competing patterns, the innovative one, is computationally more complex could shed light on the factors which can favour or delay diachronic incrementation.

3. THE ACQUISITION OF DOM IN CHILD HERITAGE ROMANIAN

3.1. DOM in Heritage Romanian: Previous studies

The acquisition of DOM in heritage Romanian has been investigated, to the best of our knowledge, only in a context in which the societal language was English and the participants were adult simultaneous and sequential bilinguals. Montrul et al. (2015)

investigated knowledge of DOM by adult first generation immigrants from Romania, young adult HSs of Romanian in the United States and adult native speakers of Romanian living in Romania. Their findings show that adult first generation immigrants do not differ with respect to knowledge of DOM from the speakers of Romanian living in the homeland. The young adult HSs behaved similarly to the control group from Romania with respect to grammaticality judgment. But they showed higher acceptance rates for DOM omission, evaluating sentences without *pe* or *pe* +AC as acceptable. The rate was higher with the group of simultaneous bilinguals, in support of Montrul's view that age of exposure is important. Montrul and Bateman (2020a, b) provide similar results on the basis of two oral tasks (story retelling and picture description) administered to the same groups of participants as in Montrul et al. (2015). First generation immigrants behaved like the native speakers in the homeland. Incorrect use of DOM was found with both simultaneous and sequential bilinguals living in the United States (for example, DOM with inanimate DPs) but incorrect omission was found only with the former. Omission of clitics was also attested. The authors conclude, on the basis of these results, that DOM is vulnerable to erosion in heritage Romanian and they account for this vulnerability in terms of language attrition or incomplete acquisition.

In the present study we extend the investigation to child HSs who live in France.

3.2. DOM in child heritage Romanian

3.2.1. Main question

In the light of what was discussed before, the main question which is addressed in this study is how variable input affects the acquisition of DOM by child HSs of Romanian living in France. Since the input reflects a diachronic change in progress, we seek to verify whether diachronic incrementation is attested in the DOM system of these children: do they preferentially use *pe* + AC as DOM to the detriment of single *pe*? Does their use of *pe* + AC go beyond the input, advancing language change, in spite of the computational complexity associated with this innovative variant?

3.2.2. Data collection and method

In order to investigate knowledge of DOM, we examined the use of DOM in 34 "frog story" narratives by child HSs of Romanian. The material used for data collection was Mercer Mayer's (1969) picture storybook *Frog, where are you?*⁷. The subjects were tested individually, following the methodology in Berman and Slobin (1994). The child HSs were asked to tell the story both in Romanian and in French. The adults (first generation immigrants in France) as well as the child monolinguals were asked to tell the story only in Romanian. The narratives were audio recorded and transcribed⁸.

⁷ The book presents, in 24 pictures, the story of a little boy whose pet frog runs away one night. The child and his dog start looking for it. They go through several adventures before they finally find the frog and discover it has a family. The same picture book was used for other corpora of L1 and 2L1 Romanian (Buja 2008, Teodorescu 2017, Tomescu 2018). This enabled the comparison of our data with data reported in previous studies.

⁸ The child heritage Romanian narratives and those of the first generation immigrant adults were collected by Alexandru Mardale and transcribed by Elena Soare, Alexandru Mardale and Andra Vasilescu.

All DOM contexts were extracted and coded as (i) obligatory or (ii) optional. The number of obligatory contexts found in the narratives was, however, extremely low; therefore, the analysis was limited to DOM use in optional contexts. Objects in optional DOM contexts were coded as (i) marked and (ii) unmarked. Percentages of marking (single *pe* and *pe* + AC) were calculated against the total number of optional DOM contexts. Percentages of *pe* + AC were calculated against the total number of marked objects. Marked objects were coded for animacy and DP type. The use of *pe* with the relative pronoun *care* ‘who, which’ was disregarded, given its frequent omission in the spoken language (Guțu Romalo 2000).

3.2.3. Participants

The child HSs who took part in the study are all simultaneous bilinguals born to Romanian families living in France. They speak Romanian in the family with both parents and siblings (and, in some cases with other family members who live in France). The language of the community is French. They all speak French at kindergarten or at school and attend optional Romanian classes, 2 hours per week. At testing time, they had been attending these classes for approximately 2 months.

The participants were divided in two groups: 17 younger children (age range 5;07 – 8;05, mean age 7;05, $SD = 1.10$), who had been attending a French kindergarten/school for two years (at the most) at testing time, and 17 older children (age range 8;10 – 11;09, mean age 10;05, $SD = 1.02$), who had been attending a French kindergarten/school for at least three years. The former are practically balanced bilinguals but for the latter French is the dominant language. Participants were assigned to one of the two groups on the basis of the following criteria: (i) the information gathered via a language questionnaire which, in the case of child participants, was filled in by the parents; (ii) the comparison of the length of the narratives and of the speaking rate per minute while telling the same story in the two languages.

DOM use by child HSs was compared to the use of DOM in the narratives of (i) 11 adult native speakers of Romanian, first generation immigrants who had been living in France for at least 8 years at testing time (mean age = 39;6, $SD = 5.64$); (ii) 10 Romanian adults living in Romania (mean age 25;2, $SD = 8.48$) (Buja corpus, Buja 2008); (iii) 17 Romanian monolinguals (age range 9;01 – 11;09, mean age = 10;01, $SD = 12.69$) (some from Buja 2008, some collected for the present study) and (iv) 17 younger Romanian monolinguals (age range 5;02 – 7;06, mean age 5;07, $SD = 0.17$) (from the “frog story” corpora in Buja 2008 and Teodorescu 2017).

3.2.4. Results

In spite of the slight difference in raw data, the comparison of DOM use (single *pe* and *pe* + AC) in optional contexts by first generation immigrants (31.5%, $n = 23/73$) to DOM use by adults living in Romania (41.4%, $n = 12/29$) revealed no statistically significant difference: $\chi^2(1) = 0.89$ $p = .34$. Adults in both groups used exclusively *pe* + AC, i.e. whenever they marked the direct object, they used both *pe* and an Accusative clitic, in line with the change in progress. They all avoided marking indefinite DPs and did not extend marking to inanimates. Given these results, we took DOM use by adult first generation immigrants as the baseline for comparison between child HSs and adults.

The younger group of HSs used DOM at a rate of 28.3% ($n = 28/99$), a level comparable to the one found with adult first generation immigrants. With the older group, whose dominant language is French, the rate of marked objects was significantly lower: 13.9% ($n = 15/108$) ($\chi^2(1) = 6.50$, $p = .011$). The 10-year-old HSs also differed from adult first generation immigrants ($\chi^2(1) = 5.79$, $p = .015$). The results are summarized in Figure 1.

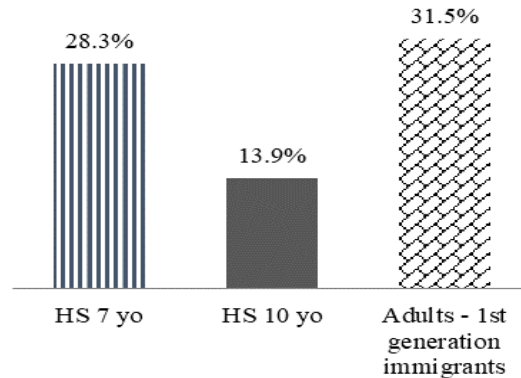


Figure 1.

Child HSs and adult first generation immigrants: DOM use in optional contexts in narratives.

No errors were attested with any of the groups of child HSs. The marked objects ($n = 28$) were practically exclusively animate and definite (one single marked indefinite was found in the narrative of a 5-year-old). No marked indefinite was found in the narratives of the 10-year-olds. The 15 marked objects were all definite animate DPs.

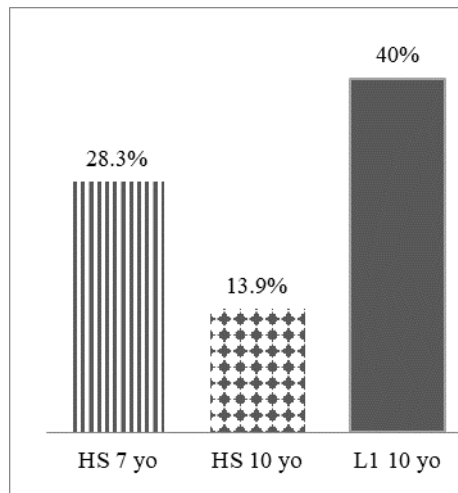


Figure 2.

Child HSs and monolingual children: DOM use in optional contexts in narratives.

The comparison of the two groups of child HSs reveals a significant difference: $\chi^2(1, N = 34) = 6.50, p = .011$. The 10-year-olds marked objects less frequently than the younger group of HSs and also at significantly lower rates than age-matched monolinguals ($\chi^2(1, N = 34) = 17.9, p = .000$). The results are summarized in Figure 2.

Child HSs, even the 7-year-olds, used *pe* + AC to a lesser extent than first generation immigrants and adults living in the homeland, who used the innovative pattern exclusively, i.e. whenever they marked an object they used both *pe* and a clitic.

The younger group used *pe* + AC with 21 out of the 28 *pe*-marked objects whereas the adults used exclusively *pe* + AC. The trend, however, is indicative of diachronic change: the younger child HSs used more often *pe* + AC than single *pe*. In the absence of a perfectly age-matched control group, we compared *pe* + AC use by the 7-year-old HSs to *pe* + AC use by a group of 5-year-old monolinguals living in the homeland. No significant difference was found between these two groups ($\chi^2(1, N = 34) = 2.41, p = .12$), despite a slight difference in the raw data.

The older HSs used *pe* + AC at a low rate of 20% ($n = 3/15$), significantly lower than the age-matched monolinguals, who used a clitic with 35 out of 38 *pe*-marked objects ($\chi^2(1, N = 34) = 27.56, p < .0001$) and also at a lower rate than the younger group of HSs ($\chi^2(1, N = 34) = 14.94, p = .0001$). Whereas the younger group used *pe* + AC significantly more often, the older group used single *pe* more frequently. The results are summarized in Figure 3.

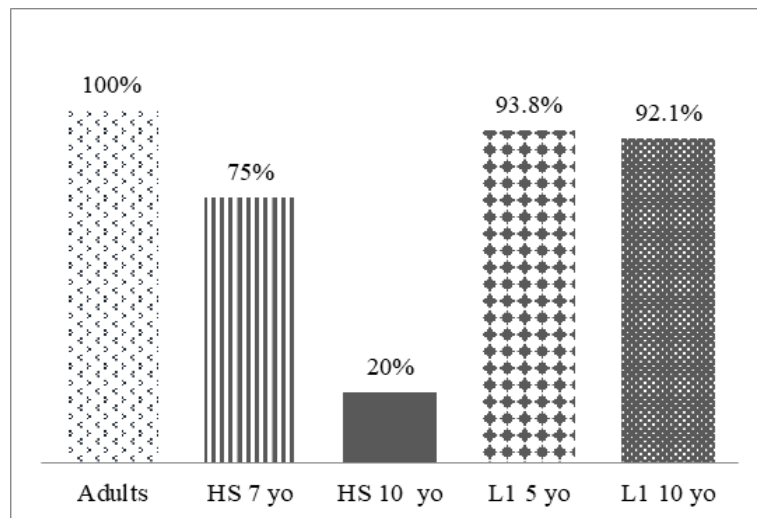


Figure 3.

Child HSs and monolingual children: CD use in optional contexts in narratives.

Closer inspection of the data revealed that child HSs used DOM correctly. No AC was found with a direct object which was not marked with *pe* (e.g. *l-a desenat *(pe) copil* ‘AC has drawn *pe* child’) and DOM with inanimate DPs was absent.

3.2.5. Discussion

The present study focused on the child HSs' knowledge of DOM in optional contexts under conditions of variable input with a view to identifying to what extent diachronic incrementation is attested in heritage language acquisition.

One important finding was that adult first generation immigrants living in France do not behave differently from the Romanian speakers in the homeland with respect to either single *pe* or *pe* + AC. These results are in line with those reported in Montrul *et al.* (2015) and Montrul and Bateman (2020a, b) for first generation immigrants living in the United States⁹. The analysis of the types of DPs which were marked in optional contexts additionally confirms the similarity between the two groups of adults. They used exclusively *pe* + AC, i.e. they did not mark objects with single *pe*, supporting those previous studies which argued that some speakers use only the innovative DOM system. This certainly does not mean that this is the only DOM grammar which children get in the input. Recall that, according to the data discussed in Section 2, there is individual variation with respect to whether both marking patterns are used or whether *pe* + AC is the only marker. The 21 adults in the present study happened to all be “innovative” speakers. Since they are all relatively young, the results reinforce the view that *pe* + AC is becoming DOM in Romanian (as suggested in Bossong 1991, 1998, Avram and Zafiu 2017, Hill and Mardale 2017, 2021).

The similarity between the DOM use attested with the two groups of adults represents convincing evidence that (i) there is a shift in DOM use from two DOM configurations to only one; this shift is present in the input which children receive; (ii) in Romanian the DOM system does not erode fast under conditions of language contact; it is still in place with adult first generation immigrants.

Second, we focused on the child HSs' knowledge of DOM in optional contexts. At first sight, the data indicate that DOM is vulnerable (possibly to erosion) in child heritage Romanian, in line with previous findings in Montrul *et al.* (2015) and Montrul and Bateman (2020a, b). Our data enabled us to see that the system is not vulnerable from the onset of acquisition; it becomes weaker in time. At age 7, overall DOM use in optional contexts does not differ from the one attested with adult first generation immigrants. But there is a significant decrease in overall DOM use (both single *pe* and *pe* + AC) from age 7 to age 10, which coincides with change in language dominance. The fact that whenever DOM is used it is used correctly shows that the system is not attrited or lost (at least not at age 10). It is only underused, which may be a precursor of attrition. DOM, a phenomenon at the interface between syntax and discourse pragmatics, is predicted to be vulnerable in bilingual acquisition.

One central question which we addressed was to what extent child HSs advance language change. Our data revealed that the 7-year-olds used *pe* + AC at a lower rate than adult first generation immigrants. But they used *pe* + AC significantly more frequently than single *pe*, i.e. their system is in line with the change in progress. The 10-year-olds, on the

⁹ Interestingly, in all these studies, like in the present one, the societal language lacks overt differential object markers, which might indicate, at first sight, that this may possibly facilitate non-attrition of DOM in the native language of first generation immigrants. But similar results were reported for the use of DOM in Romanian by adult first generation immigrants living in Spain, where the societal language has an overt marker (López Otero 2020); we thank Liliana Sánchez for pointing this out to us.

other hand, preferentially used single *pe*. 10-year-old HSs appeared to be stuck with a grammar in which both DOM patterns are still available, with single *pe* being more frequently used than *pe* + AC. Importantly, *pe* + AC was used correctly but it was underused, a fact which hinders diachronic incrementation. What we actually found in our data was the opposite of incrementation, in spite of the changing system available in the input. The change in language dominance affects clitic doubling, a configuration which involves, in addition to interface difficulty, a heavy computational load. The pressure from the dominant language, which cannot be “blocked”, may hinder access to particular configurations or features in the weaker language (Perez-Cortes et al. 2019).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the present study was to investigate the acquisition of DOM by child HSs of Romanian. Given the change which the DOM system is undergoing in this language, the data enabled us to verify if child HSs, like monolingual children, opt for the innovative variant in the input, advancing language change. Heritage language acquisition takes place under conditions of language contact and reduced input. Investigating the acquisition of DOM by HSs of Romanian in comparison to monolingual speakers enabled us to weigh the role of factors such as language dominance and input properties in heritage language acquisition. More generally it allowed us to evaluate the weight of these factors in language change.

Our data showed that child HSs of Romanian with French as the dominant language do not use the innovative variant at levels beyond the input. On the contrary, they underuse it, which hinders diachronic change. No DOM errors were found, suggesting that the system is neither lost nor attrited. We tentatively accounted for this finding in terms of the vulnerability of interface phenomena and the additional difficulties induced by the dominant language.

More generally, our findings revealed that language change can be severely delayed (or possibly absent) in heritage language acquisition when the innovative structure is computationally costly and when the language undergoing the change is the weaker one.

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