ABSTRACT

Bilingual Reading Fluency and Prediction: HL versus Second Language

By

Olga Parshina

Adviser: Irina A. Sekerina

The thesis presents the first systematic investigation of reading fluency and factors that affect it by examining eye movements in reading by Heritage Speakers (HSs) and L2 learners of Russian in comparison to monolingual adults and children. In Chapter 1 we start with establishing basic eye-movement characteristics in reading for both groups in connection to proficiency and linguistics factors of word length and frequency. Contrary to our predictions, we found that all eye-movement characteristics of high-proficiency HSs are different from those of monolingual speakers but are strikingly similar to eye movements of 8-year-old children. Low-proficiency HSs, on the other hand, were less similar to children and resemble more ‘typical’ unbalanced L2 learners. Taken together, our findings in this chapter are consistent with the weaker links account of bilingual language processing as well as the divergent attainment theory of Heritage Language (HL) development.

The goal of the study in Chapter 3 is three-fold. First, using a scanpath approach (patterned sequences of eye movements) we identify common reading strategies that participants rely on in reading isolated sentences. Next, we ask whether these reading strategies correlate with the group to which the reader belongs, i.e., HSs, L2 learners, children, or monolingual adults. Third, we investigate the effect of various factors among individual differences of HSs and L2 learners on the choice of the reading strategy. Our results align with the findings in Chapter 2. We established that monolingual participants use qualitatively and quantitatively different reading strategy from all other groups, whereas high-proficiency HSs and low-
proficiency HSs share the same strategy as children and L2 learners, respectively. We discuss findings in respect to divergent attainment theory of HL development as well as good-enough parsing account of sentence processing in L2.

Finally, in the study described in Chapter 4, we ask whether similar to monolinguals, HSs and L2 learners are able to anticipate lexical and/or morphosyntactic information to facilitate sentence comprehension in reading. The results of the cloze test in Experiment 1 showed that HSs predict the upcoming lexical item with higher accuracy than L2 learners. Importantly, the proficiency did not turn out to be a factor that affects the accuracy of lexical prediction, but the size of vocabulary in Russian was. Contrary to our hypothesis that L2 learners are more sensitive than HSs to morphosyntactic information in the sentence due to formal instruction, we did not find any evidence of morphosyntactic prediction in either of the bilingual groups. We interpret results in terms of prediction-by-production theory, HL theories of dominant language transfer and HL attrition as well as failed functional features hypothesis and good-enough hypothesis of bilingual language processing.

Taken together, the results of the three empirical studies show that HSs of Russian, regardless of their proficiency level, often experience same difficulties in reading as L2 learners and young children: Their eye movements reflect poor decoding skill, reduced lexical access and difficulties with morphosyntactic information integration and prediction. We conclude that HL status alone does not predict advantage of HSs over L2 learners in reading fluency. The proficiency, however, determines the location of HSs on a ‘continuum’ of reading abilities where low-end suggests L2-like reading fluency, mid-point describes child-like reading abilities, and the endpoint represents the reading skill of a monolingual speaker. We offer it to future research to explore whether it is possible for HSs to achieve the endpoint of reading fluency continuum.
Keywords: L2 processing, HSs, Russian, reading fluency, proficiency, eye-tracking, scanpaths, prediction.