

Variation in Verb Case Government in the Speech of Polish-German Bilinguals

The investigation of transfers from one language to the other by bilingual persons has often concentrated on cases of lexical borrowing. However, contact-induced changes or variation can be observed in other areas as well, e.g., on the morphosyntactic or syntactic level.

My paper examines the use of verb-argument structures in the speech of bilingual persons who have acquired Polish as their first language (L1) or were raised bilingually (2L1), but are now living in a German-speaking environment. In their speech, numerous deviations from the morphosyntactic rules of contemporary standard Polish can be observed, e.g.: *szukam ten adres; mój tata uwielbia języka francuskiego, też kibicowałem za Niemcami; codziennie dzwonię z rodzicami*. Therefore my talk addresses questions like: Can the observed deviations be attributed to the influence of German as the dominant language of the environment (and often nowadays the dominant language of the informants, too), are they simply results of a deactualization of Polish (= due to insufficient access to Polish), or do they reflect certain tendencies of simplification which are caused by other factors (e.g., a tendency towards analytical expressions, which has been attested to also for Polish speakers in their homeland)? To what extent do they occur regularly in the data, i.e. are they characterized by a certain degree of systematicity, or do they occur only as instances of idiolectal variation in the data? Which classes of verbs are affected by these variations, and is there some sort of hierarchy as far as the affected verb classes are concerned? Do the semantic and syntactic properties of the governed nouns also play a role in this process? Do markedness conditions account for triggering these deviations? Which sociolinguistic factors of the speakers exert an influence on the frequency of these variations in the data? Therefore the current paper tries to shed some new light on processes of language attrition by trying to separate different factors which are often not distinguished in studies on bilingualism and language attrition. Furthermore, it not only adopts an “error perspective”, but includes a “total performance perspective”, which means that not only deviations from the target structures will be examined, but also the correct production of structures of the target language.

Transcripts of interviews with 50 Polish-German bilinguals who have moved to Germany at an early age or who have already been born in Germany form the empirical base of my investigation. The data is comprised of biographical interviews, as well as short spontaneous narratives and descriptions of a picture story.