Noun incorporation and case in heritage Inuktitut

Marina Sherkina-Lieber and Kumiko Murasugi
Carleton University

A heritage language grammar often develops through insufficient exposure in childhood (incomplete acquisition) or insufficient use later in life (attrition), and manifest as deficits in grammar, both in syntax and – even more so – in functional morphology (see Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky, 2010 for a review). This paper presents the results of a study investigating a particular structure, noun incorporation (NI), in Inuktitut heritage speakers living in Ottawa. It is the first study of noun incorporation in adult heritage language grammar, as this phenomenon does not exist in more commonly studied heritage languages.

Example (1) illustrates NI in Inuktitut. The properties of NI in Inuktitut are: (1) the verb is a light verb (Johns, 2007), (2) the incorporated noun precedes the verb in the verbal complex, (3) the incorporated noun does not have case, and (4) the modifier of the incorporated noun (e.g. ‘green’ above) appears with –mik case, which is the case found on antipassive objects.

(1) Ilisaiji saa-taqq-tuq (uujaujar-mik) 'The teacher got a (green) table.'

How is case in noun incorporation represented in a heritage grammar? Fluent speakers (n=11) and heritage speakers of Baffin dialects of Inuktitut (HS, n=13) living in Ottawa participated in a grammaticality judgment task. In this paper we focus on the following conditions: preferred NI and non-NI structures, case on incorporated and non-incorporated nouns, and case on adjective modifiers of incorporated and non-incorporated nouns.

The fluent speakers preferred both structures most of the time (75%), while HS were more likely to choose just one of the structures, with the choice between NI and non-NI seemingly random (30% each).

HS were not significantly different from fluent speakers in correctly accepting caseless incorporated nouns (91% vs. 97% accuracy), but they rejected incorporated case-marked objects significantly less frequently than fluent speakers (75% vs. 98.5%). To test their general knowledge of case we also included sentences with non-incorporated nouns with and without case. They correctly accepted case-marked non-incorporated objects most of the time (88.5%), while they correctly rejected caseless objects less frequently (70.5%).

HS showed a similar pattern with correct acceptance of -mik on modifiers of incorporated objects (86% vs 95.5% for fluent) and correct rejection of missing -mik on modifiers (76% vs 95.5% for fluent), and performed better on modifiers of incorporated objects than on modifiers of non-incorporated objects. For the latter, HS performed much lower than fluent speakers in both the correct case-marked condition (66.7% vs. 93.9%) and incorrect caseless condition (53.6% vs. 92.4%).

These results suggest that HS are sensitive to the nature of the verb, the syntactic status of the object (incorporated or not), and -mik case marking requirements for incorporated and non-incorporated objects and their modifiers. Even though NI does not exist in their dominant language (English), at least some aspects of it are correctly represented in HS grammar, although its processing is inconsistent, sometimes resulting in a failure to reject unlicensed case marking.