Restructuring in L1 Turkish grammar: the effects of L2 English and L2 Dutch

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Second language (L2)-induced first language (L1) restructuring/attrition has recently become a much-discussed topic in the context of bilingualism. L2-interference dependent changes in L1 grammar is defined as deviation from the native grammar norms as a result of prolonged use of the L2, accompanied by limited contact with the L1 (Gürel 2004; Köpke et al. 2007; Tsimpli et al. 2004; Schmid et al. 2004; Sorace, 2005).

This talk addresses this issue by reporting on a comparative study of L2-English and L2-Dutch-induced syntactic changes that occur in L1 Turkish grammar of Turkish-speaking people living in North America and in the Netherlands, respectively. The linguistic property under investigation is binding properties of overt and null pronouns. The study is mostly concerned with the individual data from first-generation Turkish immigrants, who are assumed to have had a fully developed, mature L1 native grammar, before they first came to the L2 setting. English and Dutch (two non-null-subject Germanic languages) display similar binding properties and they differ from Turkish in several respects. Within this context, the specific questions we explore are 1) is L1 knowledge of binding properties of overt and null subject pronouns vulnerable to change due to L2 transfer effects?; 2) are there any differences between the L2 English-speaking and L2 Dutch-speaking Turkish people in terms of the extent of L1 grammatical restructuring they experience?

To answer these questions, data from 19 first generation and 15 second generation Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands were compared to data reported in Gürel (2002), which discusses L1 judgments of Turkish-English bilinguals living in North America (n=24) and monolingual Turkish speakers (n=30). Participants were given a written interpretation task, where they were presented with complex sentences and asked to select a possible antecedent from among the three options given (Gürel, 2002).

Results show that although attrition groups did not differ from one another, there is a significant difference between the monolingual control group and the three attrition groups in their judgments of null as well as overt pronoun binding. This suggests that L2-English and L2-Dutch influence participants' L1 syntactic judgments in a similar fashion. This might imply that however limited and selective, L2-induced change in L1 grammar is possible even in adult speakers (cf. Montrul, 2008).