CHAPTER 1

Methodology and Sociolinguistic Findings

This chapter aims to provide essential information about the methodology of the study, as well as about the participants and their sociolinguistic profiles based on the data from questionnaires and personal narratives. It is essential to start the discussion of the sociolinguistic findings with an account of the specific characteristics of the experimental study in order to delineate the benefits and limitations of the current research.

Methodology of the Study

As I already briefly mentioned in the Introduction, my study was conducted in an experimental setting and consisted of several comprehension and production tasks, which are standard in psycholinguistic research with different types of bilinguals. All the tasks except for the proficiency exam were conducted on my personal laptop, which is equipped with the Stimulus Presentation Software SuperLab 4.5 and a response pad. This software was used for collecting data on accuracy and latency of response in the globally ambiguous anaphora resolution task. The oral narratives of the participants were recorded using the recording software Audacity. When they had to listen to recorded sentences or watch video segments, the participants were provided with a pair of headphones.

This basic experimental equipment was easy to transport and set up under various experimental conditions in the United States and Russia. The experiment was conducted in faculty offices or other specifically designated spaces. All the participants completed the experiment and were compensated for their time.

The combination of official advertising and word of mouth resulted in recruiting 38 participants in the target group of heritage speakers of Russian. However, further analysis of sociolinguistic and linguistic data prompted me to

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1 This software is developed by Cedrus Corporation and has been used widely in various experimental studies in psychology, sociology, psycholinguistics, etc. Links to some of those studies can be found on the company’s website, www.cedrus.com.
exclude four of them from the study.\footnote{In particular, two of the participants were excluded because of their biological age (over 40) and age of arrival in the United States (15). Another one demonstrated extremely low proficiency in the target language, providing an insufficient amount of data for the analysis. Finally, a participant whose primary language was Russian but lived in a former Soviet republic and spoke its language had to be excluded because of possible language interference.} In addition, there were ten more potential participants who were contacted but did not respond beyond the initial inquiry.

The age of the participants varied from 18 to 30 years old, with a median age of 20.7. They were all students in various US colleges. The participants in the control group (N = 38) were also college students and were matched for age with the target group. They were enrolled in various departments at a big university in Russia and were recruited through faculty members at that university. Most of them had some knowledge of English, which is inevitable in big urban centers in Russia, but by no means were they bilinguals or used English in their daily lives.

Both groups performed the same tasks with the exception of the sociolinguistic survey, which was not given to the native speakers in Russia.

Before I turn to the specific sociolinguistic findings of my study, I would like to define more precisely the object of my investigation, heritage languages. Since previous research on heritage speakers has shown that they are a very heterogeneous population with various degrees of proficiency in the language (cf. Benmamoun et al., 2013b), it is imperative to determine their basic linguistic and cultural characteristics, which distinguish them from other bilinguals.

What is a “Heritage” Language? Who are the Heritage Speakers?

The recognition of heritage language speakers as a category separate from native speakers or even L2 learners is relatively recent. The term “heritage speaker/learner” has its origins in the education literature and broadly speaking, refers to those who have been exposed to a language of personal connection (Fishman, 2001; Gass & Glew, 2011).

Although this term is now widely accepted to designate the minority language of second-generation immigrants, ten years ago it was still seen as problematic and even negative because it pointed out to the past (not the future) and to the superiority of English in domestic and global contexts (Van Deussen-Scholl, 2003). Sociolinguists saw “heritage” as a relative term that is socially