CHAPTER 2

Input and Order of Acquisition as Variables in the Study

Quantity and Quality of Input

Of the eight sociolinguistic variables present in my sociolinguistic survey, only two were included as factors in the analysis of variance, the amount of daily input and the order of acquisition of Russian and English, simultaneous or successive.

Despite the fact that different scholars have proposed different assumptions about what constitutes “input,” it is clear that some of the important issues in the field of bilingualism (the difference between L1 and L2, for example) could be solved by “scrutinizing input at a new, much heightened level of attention” (Slabakova, 2013, p. 65). Amount and quality of input have been emphasized as factors that could contribute to both the incompleteness/indetermination of L1 grammars and fossilization in L2 acquisition (Montrul, 2005).

Heritage speakers are exposed to their language early (just like monolinguals are but in contrast with L2 learners) but according to researchers such early exposure is not sufficient for full linguistic development; early bilingual children need sustained input until they reach target levels in their linguistic development (Montrul, 2008). Interestingly, other studies did not find that reduced input leads to incomplete acquisition or divergence (cf. the literature reviewed in Kupisch, 2013). However, the latter focus specifically on high-proficiency heritage speakers, a group that is clearly different from the groups of low- and intermediate-proficiency speakers, the object of investigation of the majority of studies with heritage speakers in the US.

The factor of input has been frequently debated as playing a significant role in the less-dominant language of bilinguals, and especially, in early child bilinguals. Montrul (2008) argues that bilingual balance in young children is a function of quantity and quality of input despite the fact that they have the biological and cognitive potential to become fully competent in the two languages. No less important is the timing of input especially when we compare heritage speakers to other bilinguals, such as L2 learners, for example. Studies that examined various phonological, morphosyntactic and semantic phenomena have confirmed the benefits of receiving input in a language during the early development stages (cf. Montrul, 2005, 2010 for a review of these
findings). These benefits become even more evident if these bilinguals want to re-learn their heritage language later in adulthood despite the interrupted acquisition they experienced in their childhood (Au et al., 2002).

Contrary to the opinion of some proponents of usage-based theories, this view of input as one of the determining factors for complete or incomplete language acquisition in bilinguals is fully compatible with the UG-based approach to L1 acquisition. It is a truism that children learn the language they are exposed to, regardless of how much input they receive. Thus, any serious UG hypothesis assumes that experience plays an important role in determining the mental grammar of what particular language the learner chooses to construct (Philips, 2012).

Usage-based theories place a greater emphasis on the input properties as determinants of the language acquisition process (Paradis, 2011). In my study, I adopt a theory-neutral approach to the quantity of input as one of the sociolinguistic variables in the analysis of the results.

The role of input at the various linguistic interfaces has been a topic of discussion in recent SLA studies. Sorace (2012) has acknowledged that both the quality and the quantity of input could play a role in the acquisition of properties at the external rather than the internal interfaces. However, as some recent studies suggest, the exact nature of the relationship between input quantity and language acquisition in a dual language setting, for example, the extent to which it is linear and whether it holds across children, languages, and linguistic domains, remains unclear (Unsworth et al., 2012). In their study of the acquisition of grammatical gender in Dutch and Greek by bilingual children, Unsworth et al. provide findings of recent studies of parental input and language acquisition that show that the complex nature of the home setting could hinder the investigation of the input factor. Particularly, in the home setting the input quantity often interacts with and is affected by numerous other factors including input quality, parental education, SES, and age of onset. In order to be able to tease apart the specific role of those additional factors and their interaction with input quality, researchers have looked at one or more of those factors as separate variables.

The general concept of quality of input has been broken down to more specific instances that reflect the various spheres of use of the language, the type of speakers that provide input to the bilinguals, etc. For example, De Houwer (2007) discovers that in order to successfully acquire the minority language, it is essential that one or both parents of the bilingual child provide input in that language in the home. In some studies, the sufficient amount of that input was found to be around 60%. However, other studies didn't find an effect of home language use on children's rate of acquisition of vocabulary and verbal