Chapter 5

Anaphoric Pronouns in Oral Production

The discussion of optionality and variability in L1 and L2 of bilingual speakers in the previous chapter provided the context for the examination of the findings of the present study. In this chapter I present the data from one of the production tasks and offer proportion analyses of the distribution of anaphoric 3rd person pronouns and post-verbal subjects in elicited oral narratives.

The pros and cons of Production Tasks

Studies of the cluster of properties pertaining to the null subject parameter have often used production tasks in order to uncover the particular loci of divergence in bilingual null subject grammars compared to their monolingual counterparts. Studies of both elicited and naturalistic production of null and overt pronouns have abounded since the early 1990s and for the most part have shown that formal constraints on null subjects are acquired early but that discursive constraints take much longer and tend to result in residual optionality and variability (cf. Alhawari, 2005; Lozano, 2009; Montrul, 2008; Montrul & Rodríguez-Louro, 2006; Sorace, 2011 for a review).

Studies that focus on production of pronouns are very relevant for examining the specifics of both syntactic and discourse factors that regulate anaphoric dependencies, particularly in the language of early child bilinguals (cf. Serratrice et al., 2004). Naturalistic data from observations on these children’s interaction with their caregivers has proven particularly valuable for studying the specific characteristics of the representation and processing at the syntax-discourse interface. This is the domain that has been suggested to present residual problems for early bilinguals, L1 attriters and near-native L2 learners since all these speakers have to manage two languages and use the appropriate constraints for each language (cf. the discussion of the Interface Hypothesis in the previous chapter).

Despite the outlined advantages of production studies, some researchers have raised methodological concerns that the nature of such tasks possibly could have magnified the overproduction of redundant overt subject pronouns in maintain-reference contexts, which are perceptually more salient than null subject pronouns in a shift-reference context (Sorace et al., 2009). In order to address such concerns, a lot of studies have conducted and compared the
results of production and comprehension tasks so that the analysis of coreferential patterns with null and overt pronouns is more balanced (Belletti et al., 2007; Rothman, 2007, 2009a; Sorace & Filiaci, 2006; Tsimpli et al., 2004). Their findings have demonstrated that different types of bilinguals exhibit similar patterns of behavior in the comprehension and production of null and overt pronouns in canonical null subject languages, namely overacceptance and overuse of overt pronouns.

In my study I adopt a similar approach and juxtapose the performance and interpretation of subject pronouns in heritage Russian. In addition to investigating coreferential patterns as characteristic of the syntax-discourse interface, I also look at the more general distribution of referring expressions in larger discourse in terms of introduction, maintenance, and retrieval of referential entities. Similarly to discourse constraints on pronominal resolution that have been shown to be more complex and require more effort, the related development of referring expressions is seen as a gradual process that continues into adulthood. Bilingual and monolingual children have been observed to produce ambiguous pronouns to maintain reference to main characters quite frequently, something that has prompted scholars to suggest that both L1 and L2 of children are guided by universal strategies in their development of referring expressions to fulfill different discourse functions (cf. Chen & Pan, 2009).

**Anaphoric Pronouns and Other Referring Expressions in Discourse: Distribution Principles**

Most researchers agree that pragmatic or discourse-pragmatic principles are the core of antecedent preferences with overt pronouns in pro-drop languages; nevertheless, there is still disagreement about the particular characteristics of such principles and their manner of operation. Some scholars have analyzed overproduction of overt pronouns in contexts of accessible topic antecedent as a violation of Grice’s Maxim of Quantity because a less complex form, such as a null pronoun, should have been used instead (Sorace & Filiaci, 2006). The correlation between discourse-based accessibility and prominence, on the one hand, and the choice of referring expressions, on the other, has been the foundation of such hypotheses as the Givenness Hypothesis (Gundel, 2010) and the Information Load Hypothesis (Almor, 1999; Lezama & Almor, 2011), to mention just a couple.

Rothman (2009a) proposes that the operation of another pragmatic principle or universal, the Avoid Pronoun Principle, is the one that limits the use of