

Morphological Attrition and Phonological Maintenance in a Heritage Speaker of Finnish

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Introduction

When a heritage speaker stops speaking a language, what is maintained – and what is lost – into adulthood?

This study examines vowel production and knowledge of morphophonological grammar rules in the speech of a heritage Finnish speaker. It explores the extent to which these features are maintained in spite of language attrition (1, 4, 5).

Participants

1. A **heritage speaker** of the Finnish-American dialect of Finnish (called *fiingelska*, *amerikansuomi*, or *Finglish*, 2, 3)
 - Learned Finnish and English in childhood; stopped speaking Finnish at school age
 - Reacquiring Finnish as a second language in late adulthood
2. A **native Finnish speaker** from Finland
 - Studying in the U.S. for one year
3. An adult **second language (L2) learner** of Finnish (L1: American English)

Procedure

Task: Word translation, and generation of a corresponding genitive phrase (*Xn kuva*, “the picture of X”)

Example Trial

“dog”	“koira”	“koiran kuva”
PROMPT	EXPECTED TRANSLATION	EXPECTED GENITIVE PHRASE

Finnish Consonant Gradation

Application of the genitive suffix *-n* to a Finnish noun often causes changes in the onset consonant of the final syllable. Processes include:

- Degemination (*kukka* → *kukan*)
- Assimilation (*lento* → *lennon*)
- Changes to single stops (*sota* → *sodan*, *tapa* → *tavan*, *mäki* → *mäen*)

Results: Consonant Gradation

Both the heritage speaker and L2 learner sometimes deviated from standard rules when producing forms with consonant gradation.

- lento* → *lenton kuva* (standard Finnish *lennon kuva*)
- sänky* → *sänkyn kuva* (standard Finnish *sängyn kuva*)

However, degemination was reliable for the heritage speaker and the native speaker from Finland, while it was not for the L2 learner.

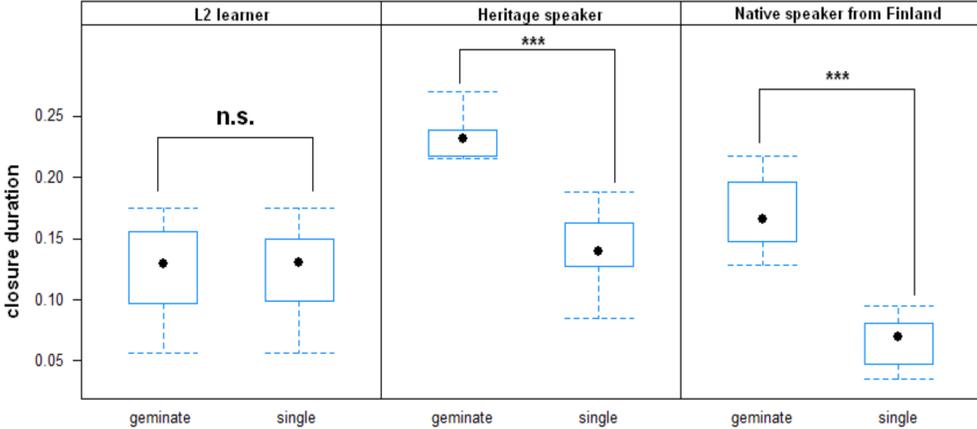


Fig. 1. Closure durations of geminate and single stop consonants for the L2 learner, heritage speaker, and native speaker from Finland.

Results: Vowel Production

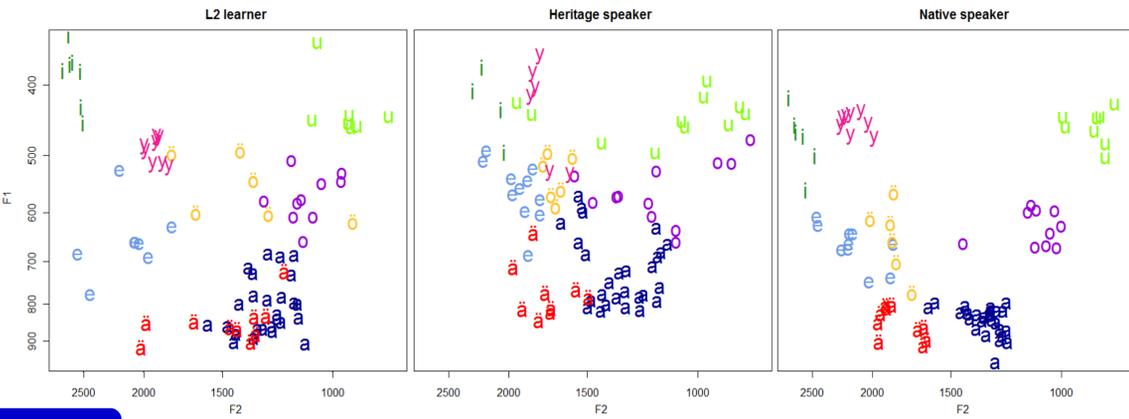


Fig. 2. Vowel spaces of the three speakers.

Conclusions

The heritage speaker's Finnish had similarities to both the native Finnish speaker and the L2 learner. These results suggest a complicated pattern of retention and attrition in the use of a heritage language.

For future study: What is the source of this complex pattern?

- (1) Maintenance of generalized phonological knowledge but loss of specific rules?
- (2) Maintenance of phonetic exemplars but loss of phonological grammar?
- (3) Selective interference from the dominant language?

References

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