Variability in Case Government among Russian Heritage Speakers in Germany

Assessing the Impact of Language Contact Across Three Generations

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Introduction

Previous research has emphasized the role of language contact with the majority language in heritage language (HL) acquisition (Montrul, 2015; Polinsky, 2018). There is debate on whether contact-induced changes in HL arise within the HL speakers' generation or are inherited from the parents' language (Daskalaki et al., 2020; Pires & Rothman, 2009). Our project investigates the development of Russian across three generations in Germany, focusing on the syntax-semantics interface, specifically the case government, a vulnerable domain in Russian-German language contact (Wald, 2021).

Sample

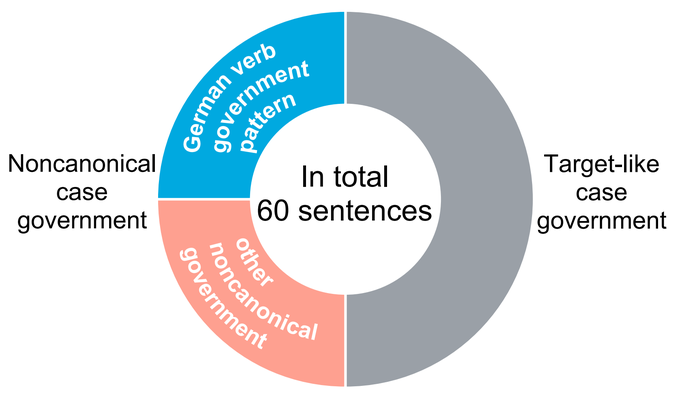
- **H**eritage **s**peakers: born in Germany or arrived between the ages of 1-2 years
- **E**arly-**s**equential **b**ilinguals: arrived around puberty
- **L**ate-**s**equential **b**ilinguals: arrived as adults

Group	n (f/m)	Age (SD)	AoA (SD)
HS	25 (17/8)	10–16 (1.74)	0–2 (0.47)
ESB	18 (11/7)	29–42 (3.86)	7–16 (2.25)
LSB	22 (19/3)	40–70 (7.58)	21–53 (9.19)

Research questions

1. Does the variability in case government of verbs differ across three generations of Russian-German bilingual speakers, and which generation exhibits the greatest degree of variability?
2. To what extent can cross-linguistic influence (CLI) from the majority language German explain the variability in case government of verbs in Russian?

Methodology & material



Three verb groups

Russian [English]	Frequency (ipm)	German
1. Verbs governing bare case forms in both languages		
звонить (dat) [to call]	*684.1*	anrufen (acc)
2. Verbs governing bare case forms in one language but requiring a prepositional phrase in the other		
заниматься (inst) [to engage in]	*408.2*	sich beschäftigen (mit + dat)
3. Verbs triggering prepositional phrases in both languages		
ехать (на + inst) [to go by]	*577.0*	fahren (mit + dat)

Table1: Three verb groups with an example each. Total of 30 verbs in judgment task.

Acceptability Judgment Task

Пассажиры ждут ближайшего рейса.

0:00 / 0:02

Туристы ждут на скорый поезд.

0:00 / 0:02

Analysis and results

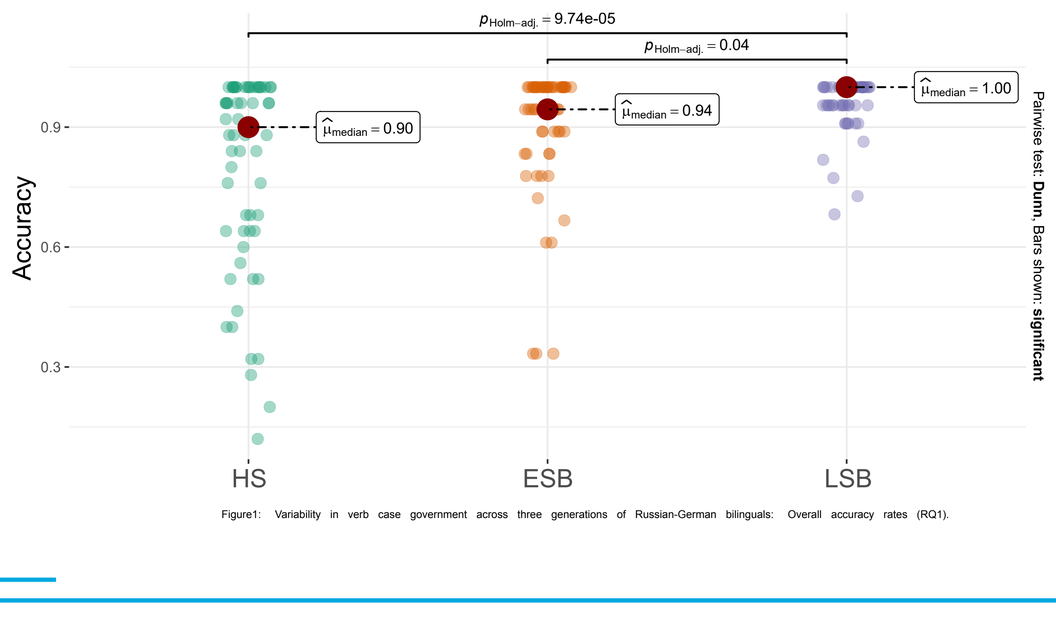


Figure1: Variability in verb case government across three generations of Russian-German bilinguals: Overall accuracy rates (RQ1).

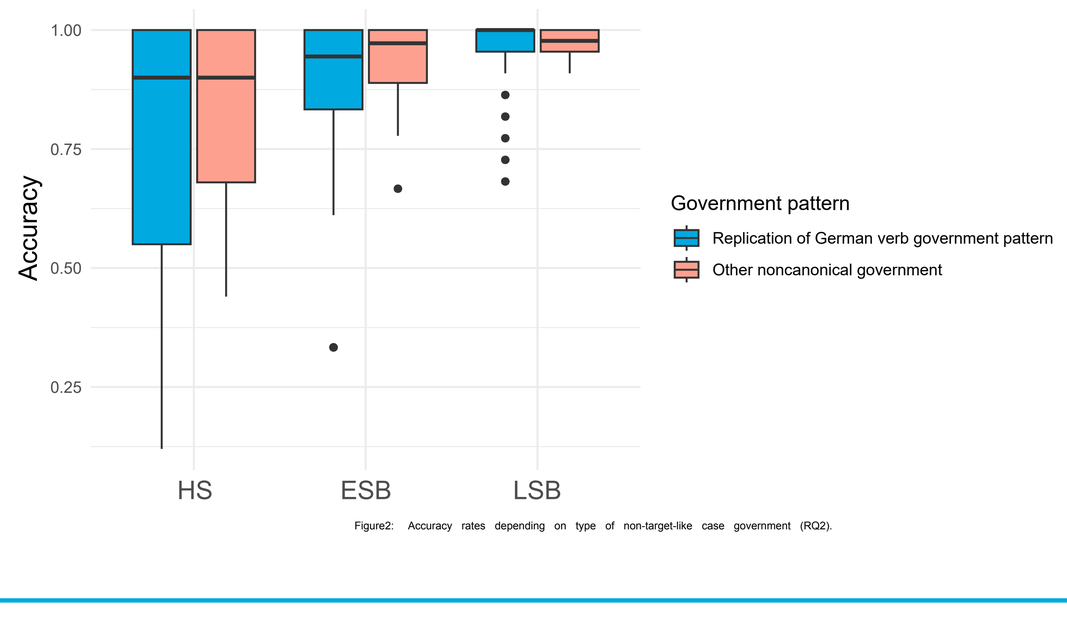


Figure2: Accuracy rates depending on type of non-target-like case government (RQ2).

Conclusions

The results reveal statistically significant differences in accuracy among the three groups. Heritage speakers showed the lowest accuracy scores, while late-sequential bilinguals had the highest (Fig. 1). Most of the inaccurate responses (HS: 83%; ESB: 82%; LSB: 77%) involved accepting incorrect sentences as correct. Although forms that exhibited CLI from German were slightly more often accepted than those showing noncanonical forms not related to CLI, the differences were not significant (Fig. 2). CLI, thus, cannot be considered the major factor that triggers variability in case government in heritage Russian in Germany (see Wald, 2021 for a similar finding). The heritage speakers themselves are the primary source of variability or potential language change. However, some early-sequential bilinguals can also provide non-target-like input for heritage speakers. Prepositions are a significant cause of variability in heritage speakers (see verb groups 2 and 3 in Tab. 1). In contrast, they master the bare case government of verbs more easily.

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