

On Covert Tense-Aspect Restructuring in Heritage Russian: A Case of Aspectually Transient Predicates

Oksana Laleko
University of Minnesota

1. Introduction

The temporal concepts of tense and aspect have for a long time been central to the development of linguistic theory at large and over the years have generated a rich body of research within the fields of syntax, semantics, and first and second language acquisition. More recently, research on temporality in general and verbal aspect in particular has become of great interest within the emerging linguistic field of heritage language acquisition (henceforth, HLA), a field that brings together the literature on various aspects of incomplete acquisition and L1 attrition in striving to deepen our understanding of the linguistic processes that drive the development of heritage grammars, distinguishing them from the full-fledged corresponding baseline systems. The present study is an investigation into the tense-aspect system of heritage Russian (HR), a linguistic variety spoken by people whose L1 (Russian) has at a young age been replaced with a more dominant L2 (English), resulting in a systematic restructuring of various areas of the L1 grammar.

The aspectual system has been found to be subject to vast systematic reorganization in a HLA context (Jia & Bayley, 2008; Montrul, 2002); in heritage Russian, the perfective-imperfective aspectual contrast has been argued to be essentially lost altogether (Pereltsvaig, 2005; Polinsky, 2009). That is, while (full) Russian expresses viewpoint aspect via the perfective-imperfective opposition in the verbal domain, heritage speakers of Russian tend to use the perfective morphology predominantly with telic¹ verbs, while atelic verbs tend to become invariably imperfective in a heritage grammar of Russian (Polinsky, 1995, 1997, 2009). Aspectual morphology in HR is therefore said to encode lexical (telic-atelic), rather than grammatical (perfective-imperfective) aspect (Pereltsvaig, 2002, 2004).

Aspectual marking in HR has so far been studied largely in isolation from the corresponding tense morphology, possibly because (some) heritage speakers of Russian have been reported to make few or no mistakes with tense (e.g., Pereltsvaig, 2005, pp. 377, 380). In terms of approach, much of the existing work on HR generally seems to have been focused first and foremost on ‘errors’, i.e. forms used ‘incorrectly’ from the point of view of a native speaker of Russian. This could be due to the nature of the elicitation techniques employed most commonly in early work on HLA: methodologically, the fundamental groundwork on HR, for instance, was based on the analysis of transcripts of spontaneous or semi-spontaneous production (interviews, story-telling), rather than controlled experimental tasks, making it rather difficult to draw quantitative conclusions about the restructuring phenomena that do not result in errors, or overt deviations from the baseline. Yet, because absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, lack of errors in production may not be a guarantee of full convergence with the baseline. Gradual reorganization of a grammatical system may in principle manifest itself in subtle (but measurable) shifts that nevertheless do not lead to mistakes.

Here, I will refer to such grammatical shifts in a heritage grammar as *covert restructuring*. The term ‘covert’ in this sense refers to a type of systematic grammatical reorganization that may not be immediately detectable (particularly with high proficiency speakers), as it does not result in incorrect

¹ In this context, the telic-atelic distinction is essentially based on the Vendlerian classification of verbs into states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements. The former two classes are traditionally grouped together as atelic predicates (e.g., *love, sleep, play*), because they arguably do not involve an inherent endpoint. The latter two classes, on the other hand, are said to include a potential endpoint (or telos) as part of their meaning (e.g., *run a mile, realize, die*), and are hence categorized as telic.

forms, or errors, but one that may nevertheless distinguish a heritage grammar from the grammar of the corresponding baseline variety in systematic ways.

In this paper, I explore covert grammatical restructuring in the tense-aspect domain, focusing specifically on a group of verbs that have received considerable attention in recent work on aspect cross-linguistically, but have not yet been treated systematically in the studies on aspect in HR, focused by and large on inherent lexical properties of individual verbal roots. Building on the existing findings that link (im)perfectivity in HR with (a)telicity, I follow Verkuyl (1993, 1999) in departing from the assumption that telicity is always lexically encoded in the verb itself. In fact, the overwhelming majority of verbal predicates, activities and accomplishments (Slabakova, 2002, p. 88), have been characterized as aspectually transient (Verkuyl, 1999; Gavruseva, 2003), unspecified for telicity or [α -telic] (Slabakova, 2001), or exhibiting the so-called variable telicity effects, e.g. shifts between activity and accomplishment readings (Dowty, 1979). Examples such as those in (1) below frequently serve as an illustration of the phenomenon:

- (1) a. Mary ate oranges/drank tea/read books.
b. Mary ate the oranges/drank a cup of tea/read two books.

While the verbs *eat*, *drink*, and *read* in (1a) are interpreted as activities (and therefore atelic), predicates in (1b), with the same verbs, have an accomplishment sense and are thus interpreted as telic. Aspectual contrasts between (1a) and (1b) are due to the particular properties of the nominal arguments, rather than the verbs themselves, suggesting that telicity in these examples is derived compositionally, rather than lexically specified at the verb level. As proposed by Verkuyl (1993, 1999), the specified or unspecified quantity of an argument ([+/-SQA]) is crucial in determining the telicity of a predicate at the VP level, which is taken to be the level relevant for the construal of temporal structure. Nominal arguments in examples (1a), i.e. bare plurals and mass nouns, have the feature [-SQA] and therefore contribute to the atelic interpretations of the predicates. In contrast, arguments in (1b) are [+SQA], due to the presence of determiners and quantifiers, and thus give rise to telicity at the VP level.

2. The Study

2.1. Questions, Assumptions, Predictions

In this study, I address the question of whether the heritage grammar of Russian exhibits any systematic signs of covert divergence from the monolingual grammar with respect to the marking of aspect and tense with aspectually transient predicates, and what such differences, if detected, may tell us about the reorganization of the corresponding grammatical systems in a HLA context. This umbrella question is further sub-divided into two components: first, I address the relationship between telicity and viewpoint aspect (Subsection 2.3); the remainder of the section is then dedicated to tense (Subsection 2.4 onwards). Because the existing data on the distribution of tense marking in HR is scarce, I first provide a detailed descriptive analysis of the overall patterns of tense marking in the data, paying special attention to the distribution of inflected and uninflected forms as well as to the proportion of past, present, and future forms; then, the interaction between tense and telicity is examined.

The latter issue presents a complex phenomenon that has been approached from multiple angles in a number of cross-linguistic studies on L1 and L2 acquisition, where ample evidence has been cited in support of (a particular version of) the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen and Shirai, 1996; Andersen, 2002), which links the occurrence of the tense and aspect morphology in early acquisition stages with lexical aspect via the Prototype Account. The account suggests that language learners are sensitive to the distributional information in the input, from which they create the initial prototype, represented by the least marked members of a given category; later, their linguistic representations are actively reorganized as the more marked members of the category enter the system (Andersen and Shirai, 1996, p. 560). The theory, among other predictions, associates past tense marking and perfective marking

with telic predicates as a prototypical (i.e., least marked) combination². The assumption that the continua of heritage grammars are dynamic systems often characterized by processes of restructuring towards simplification yields the question of whether (and to what extent) heritage speakers resemble early L1 and L2 learners in preferring the most prototypical, rather than marginally- or non-prototypical combinations of the tense-aspect markers, and if so, which specific features shape the most prototypical clusters in a heritage grammar.

2.2. *Participants and Methodology*

The data discussed in this study come from nine heritage speakers of Russian (mean age = 24; mean age of arrival to the US = 5.5) and nine monolingual Russian speakers in the control group. The monolingual³ Russian speakers (mean age = 33) were tested in Russia, their permanent place of residence. The task that I will focus on here is a sentence construction experiment. The participants in both groups were provided with 20 predicates, consisting of an aspectually transient verb in its bare form (e.g., *write*) followed by a direct object (e.g., *two letters*). They were then asked to construct sentences in Russian based on these predicates, one sentence for each VP. Because the predicates were presented in English, the target verbs were unmarked for aspect; however, in constructing Russian sentences out of the target predicates, the speakers were faced with a choice of the aspectual form for each verb. Each target predicate contained a direct object DP of either specified or unspecified quantity (henceforth, [+/-Q]), for a total of 10 verbs and 20 nominal arguments. Thus, each verb appeared twice in the experiment – once in an activity sense (e.g., *eat popcorn*) and once with an accomplishment reading (e.g., *eat a sandwich*). The [+Q] objects included noun phrases with determiners (*a cake, the house*), overt numerals (*two letters*) and quantifiers (*lots of mistakes*), while the [-Q] objects were represented in the test by bare plurals and mass nouns without determiners (*houses, popcorn*). The experimental items were presented to the participants in a randomized order, with fillers. Prior to the sentence construction task, the participants were asked to name the target phrases in Russian without context. This additional task confirmed that all participants, particularly the speakers in the control group, were able to understand and successfully translate the test items from English.

2.3. *Results: Aspect*

The overall distribution of perfective and imperfective forms with telic and atelic predicates is presented in Fig. 1. As predicted, speakers in the heritage group exhibited a strong preference towards perfective aspectual forms in compositionally telic contexts: in the presence of a [+Q] object, 87.8% of the target predicates occurred with perfective marking and 12.2% were in the imperfective. In contrast, [-Q] objects consistently triggered imperfective aspectual marking on the same verbs: 95.4% of the target predicates surfaced as imperfectives in atelic contexts and only 4.6% were perfective. These patterns point to a correlation between verbal aspectual marking and telicity in a compositional sense for [α]-telic verbs in heritage Russian: in the absence of lexical information on verbal roots, aspectual marking seems to be correlated with the [+/-Q] feature on the internal argument in the data from heritage speakers.

The observed correlation clearly distinguishes heritage speakers from the monolingual speakers of Russian in the control group in the telic condition. As shown in Fig. 1, Russian speakers in the control group showed no preference for either aspect in the presence of [+Q] objects: verbs were divided

² This is the first of three predictions in Anderson (2002). The second and third predictions involve the spread of the imperfective past and progressive marking, respectively. Because very few past imperfective forms occurred in the data from heritage speakers, and because Russian does not have a separate progressive marker, the remaining two predictions will not be examined in detail.

³ The term ‘monolingual’ is used here as a functional label to refer to people who are proficient in only one language and use only this language for all everyday communication. Some rudimentary knowledge of English, which was sufficient for the task, was obtained by the participants in a classroom setting as part of compulsory foreign language instruction during secondary schooling. However, it is assumed here that this kind of exposure in and of itself can hardly be considered indicative of bilingualism.

roughly equally between perfective (48.8%) and imperfective (51.2%) aspects in all compositionally telic contexts.

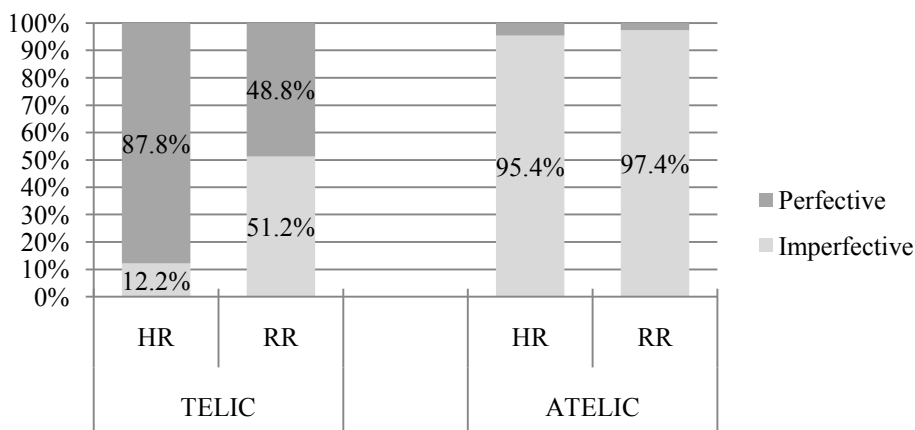


Fig. 1. The distribution of perfective and imperfective forms in compositionally telic and atelic contexts for heritage (HR) and monolingual (RR) speakers of Russian.

The distribution of perfective and imperfective forms in the atelic condition in the monolingual data (namely, a virtual absence of perfectives in the presence of [-Q] arguments) lends empirical support to earlier observations regarding the special nature of the perfective aspect in Russian: perfective prefixes have been argued to necessarily contribute to a [+Q] interpretation of the object DP (Verkuyl, 1999) and are hence incompatible with [-Q] arguments. Consistent with this observation, 97.4% of verbs surfaced as imperfective in the atelic condition in the data from the control group.

2.4. Results: Tense

This section begins with some general descriptive remarks with respect to tense marking in HR, as observed in the sentence-construction data. The first and perhaps most notable observation with regard to tense is that most of the verb forms elicited from heritage speakers were free of tense-marking altogether. At first glance, this finding is not surprising and can be attributed to the nature of the elicitation task: although the participants were free to use any verb form in constructing sentences, the test items (the building blocks, so to say) were bare, uninflected verbs. What does seem interesting, then, is not the overall large number of uninflected verb forms in the sentence-construction data for both groups, but the contrast emerging between the two groups: given the same stimuli, heritage speakers preferred non-finite forms, while the monolingual controls preferred forms with overt tense marking (Fig. 2).

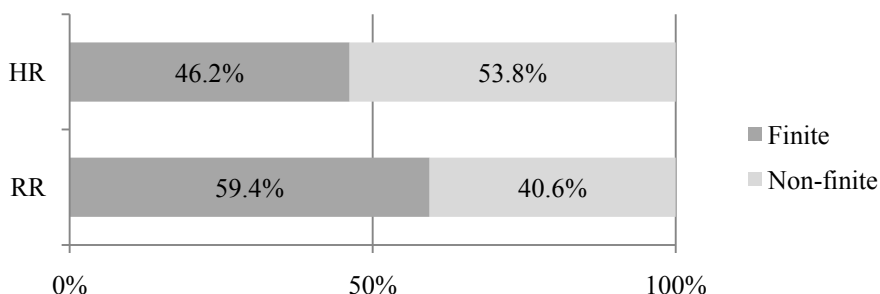


Fig. 2. The distribution of verbs with respect to finiteness.

Verbs that were unmarked for tense, i.e. imperatives and infinitives, revealed some additional differences between the two groups. Heritage speakers produced considerably more imperatives than the monolinguals (8.7% and 1.7% of all predicates, respectively). Infinitives were also more frequent in the heritage data (45.2% vs. 32.6%), with an additional restriction emerging on the contextual distribution of the infinitive forms. For heritage speakers, infinitives were almost twice as likely to occur as complements of modal predicates (such as *moch* ‘can/be able to’, *umet* ‘be able to’, *nuzhno* ‘need’) than in the monolingual data, and an overwhelming majority of such embedded infinitives were both telic and perfective in the heritage data (81.2%); the remaining forms were either telic but imperfective (6.3%) or atelic but perfective (12.5%), but never atelic and imperfective (0%). No comparable distributional tendency was observed in the monolingual data, where all infinitive forms with overt modals were distributed equally between telic-perfective and atelic-imperfective classes.

In contexts where the target verbs were marked for tense, the two groups differed with respect to the use of past, present, and future forms. Fig. 3 below presents the overall distribution of tensed verb forms in the corpus.

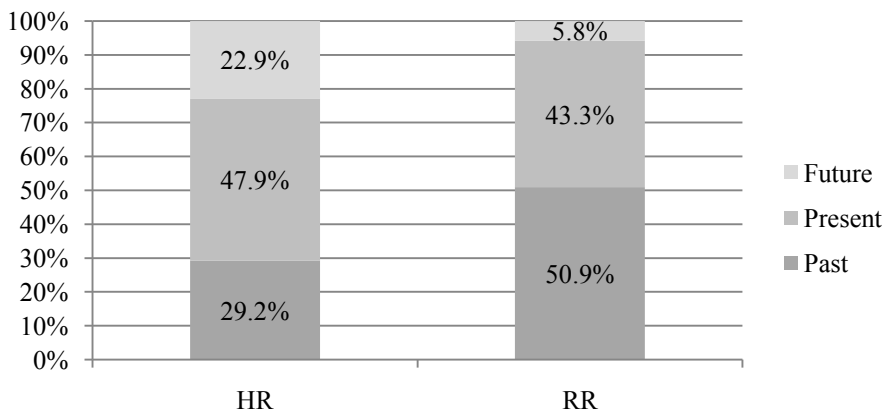


Fig. 3. The distribution of finite verbs with respect to tense.

While heritage speakers overall preferred to use present tense marking, speakers in the control group used past tense forms most frequently: over half of all tensed verb forms in the monolingual data were past tense verbs (50.9%), compared to only about a third (29.2%) in the heritage data. Further, we can see from Fig. 3 that the two groups also differed with respect to the use of the future tense: in the data from heritage speakers, almost a quarter of all tensed verbs had a future tense interpretation (22.9%). The controls, in contrast, used a surprisingly low (at least in comparison) 5.8% of target verbs in future contexts. Finally, the two groups differed minimally in their use of the present tense (47.9% for heritage speakers and 43.3% for controls).

Having described some general patterns in the data, I now turn to the question of whether or not (and to what degree) the (a)telicity of a predicate correlates with tense marking, both for heritage and monolingual speakers of Russian. If heritage speakers indeed prefer the most prototypical combinations of linguistic properties, as the data in Subsection 2.3 above seem to indicate for the domain of aspect (Fig. 1), we can expect past tense marking to surface predominantly in telic contexts, and a preference for present tense marking is predicted with atelic predicates. The monolingual speakers are likely to show a wider range of mappings through a larger number of non-prototypical clustering of tense-aspect markers.

Fig. 4 illustrates the results. As predicted, heritage speakers were found to associate past tense morphology predominantly with telic situations, using 78.6% of all past forms in telic contexts. Similarly, present tense morphology in this group appears to be restricted primarily to atelic situations, with 87% of present tense verbs occurring with atelic predicates. These results seem parallel to those on the distribution of aspectual forms in telic and atelic contexts in Fig. 1 in that the more prototypical clusters of linguistic features (e.g., telicity and perfectivity; telicity and past tense) are preferred. Note, however, that in the aspectual domain, a qualitative difference emerges between heritage and

monolingual speakers in the telic condition (presence vs. absence of correlation between verbal aspect and object DP). With respect to tense, on the other hand, the difference between the two groups appears to be one of degree, rather than quality: data from the control group exhibited the same distributional pattern as data from the heritage group, although the correlation between telicity and tense was slightly weaker in the monolingual data. Here, nearly two-thirds of all past tense forms, or 66%, occurred with telic predicates, and 66.7% of all present tense forms were attested with atelic predicates.

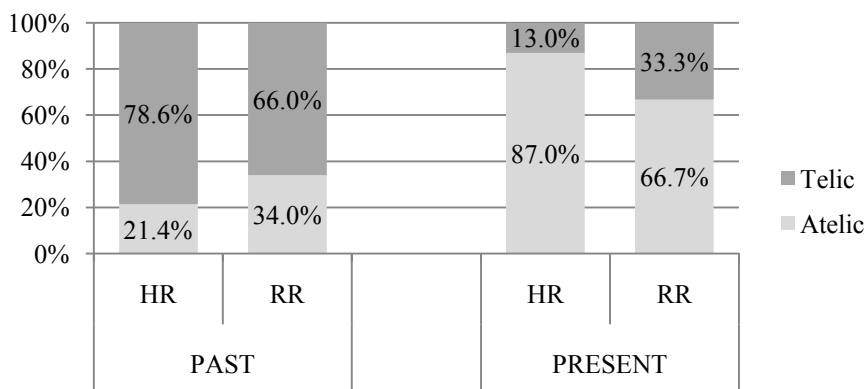


Fig. 4: The distribution of telic and atelic predicates across past and present contexts.

2.5. Discussion

In what follows, I present an overall discussion of the results, drawing, when possible, on the relevant findings in the existing literature on language acquisition (including L1, L2, and heritage acquisition) in order to account for the observed differences between the two groups with respect to the marking of aspect and tense with aspectually transient predicates.

Heritage speakers have been found to differ qualitatively from the monolingual speakers in associating verbal aspectual marking with particular properties of verbal internal arguments. In the telic condition, no association between the DP argument and verbal aspect seems to exist in the monolingual data, where both perfective and imperfective forms have been found to occur freely with [+Q] arguments. In restricting perfective verbs to [+Q] contexts, the heritage grammar thus exhibits signs of covert restructuring in the aspectual domain, manifested in a rule-like preference not observed in the baseline data.

In her work on L2 acquisition of telicity, Slabakova (1999, 2002) argues that English and Slavic differ parametrically with respect to the encoding of telicity in the VP: in English, cardinality of the direct object is fully responsible for telic or atelic interpretations of predicates with [α]-telic verbs. In Slavic languages, however, the direct object does not matter with this type of verbs, because another strategy is available: telicity is assigned by verbal prefixes (preverbs). If the role of the direct object in the encoding of telicity is indeed parametric, then the observed difference between the heritage and the monolingual groups in the telic condition (Fig. 1) could be due to the different settings of the telicity parameter value: in the heritage grammar, the presence of a [+Q] object in the VP triggers telicity, marked overtly via the perfective aspectual marking; in the baseline grammar of Russian, the presence of a [+Q] object is not viewed as relevant for aspectual marking⁴.

⁴ The data in Fig. 1 further suggest that the two grammars converge in atelic contexts, where the imperfective forms are used almost exclusively by speakers in both groups. It is interesting to note that in a study on L2 acquisition of telicity, Bulgarian learners of English consistently differed from native speakers of English in telic contexts but performed on the same level with native speakers in all atelic contexts (Slabakova, 1999). I do not discuss this issue any further due to space limitations; however, a more detailed discussion is offered in Laleko (2008).

As far as tense is concerned, the following distributional properties have been observed in the data from heritage speakers, as compared to the monolingual data: an overall preference towards non-finite forms; a comparatively large proportion of imperatives; an association of some kind between modality and perfectivity-telicity; underuse of past tense forms, overuse of future tense forms, and convergence with the baseline with respect to present tense forms.

It is possible that a comparatively large proportion of the imperative forms observed for the heritage group in the sentence-construction data (8.7% versus only 1.7% in the control group) is indicative of relative stability and possibly even functional extension of the imperative as a verb form in the context of HLA: emergence of the imperative as a verbal citation form, for instance, is a well-documented phenomenon in heritage Russian or American Russian (e.g., Polinsky, 1995, 2000). In fact, the imperative is listed among the most common verb forms used by heritage Russian speakers in Polinsky (2000, p. 457).

Elicitation of bare target VPs in citation forms, performed with the participants of the present study prior to the sentence-construction experiment, provides results very much in line with these previous findings. When asked to produce the target predicates in isolation, i.e. without the sentential context, participants in the heritage group used 36.0% of verbs in the imperative (62.3% in the infinitive and the remaining 1.7% in the third person singular present), while the monolingual speakers of Russian used the infinitive on this task nearly 100% of the time. The at-ceiling performance of the Russian speakers in the control group is fully consistent with the commonly noted use of the infinitive as a standard citation form of a Russian verb, a lexicographic convention with which all educated speakers of Russian are likely to be familiar. Due to lack of formal instruction and literacy skills, heritage speakers are unlikely to follow (or even be aware of) this convention.

Polinsky (2000) suggests that frequency in the input, rather than a formal standard, may determine which form will be used by a heritage speaker as a citation form: “for verbs, this is either the imperative or a past/present tense form, usually third person” (p. 453). The data on the frequency of verb forms in Russian given in Šteinfeldt (1965) confirms that past tense verbs are indeed very frequent (44.2% of all Russian verbs occur in the past tense). The present tense, however, is somewhat less frequent (26.6%). Infinitives account for 15.2% of all verb forms, and imperatives are found to be among the least frequent forms in Šteinfeldt’s corpus (these constitute only 4.6% of all verb forms). However, it is important to keep in mind that these numbers reflect word frequencies in Literary Russian and that the relevant percentages could be different in other varieties of Russian (for instance, imperative forms may be significantly more frequent in child-directed speech).

The apparent stability of the imperative in a heritage grammar may have its roots in early L1 acquisition, where imperatives have been documented to be among the earliest forms acquired cross-linguistically (Slobin, 1985, in Polinsky, 2000, p. 453). This tendency is consistent with an overall robustness of untensed verb forms at the onset of L1 and L2 acquisition. In literature on L1 development it is commonly reported that children initially prefer untensed forms and only then “gradually introduce tensed forms in their grammar which will eventually replace the infinitives” (Myles, 2005, p. 90). Evidence from studies on L2 acquisition points to a similar developmental path for L2 learners, for whom the use of finite verbs also increases gradually over time (Myles, 2005, p. 103). An overview of the cross-linguistic literature on child L2 acquisition suggests that omission of finiteness markers might be “a significant characteristic of child L2 interlanguage” in general, regardless of the L2 or the L1 background (Paradis, 2007, p. 392 and references therein). In a comprehensive longitudinal research project on untutored second language acquisition by adult immigrants, the researchers reach a similar conclusion for adult L2 acquisition, where linguistic “[d]evelopment goes from nominal via infinite to finite utterance organisation” (Klein and Perdue, 1993, p. 25). Overall, the regular marking of finiteness in L2 is characterized as a late development (Perdue, 1993, p. 36) of a slow, gradual, and continuous nature, “without sharp developmental steps” (Klein, 1993, p. 109).

Problems with production of finite verbs have further been documented for children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and agrammatic aphasic patients. These populations have been reported to produce a large number of non-finite verbs and a restricted number of finite verbs in spontaneous production (Bastiaanse et al., 2002 and references therein). Overall, studies on various aspects of language development, focused on various types of intermittent grammars (e.g., L1, L2, SLI), seem to

point to a non-finite bias in production as a particular (and relatively stable) stage of grammatical development, and the results of the present study could be taken to suggest that heritage acquisition may have a similar developmental stage.

Additional parallels with language development, particularly early L1 acquisition, can be drawn from data that possibly point to an emerging association between modality and perfectivity (and telicity) in non-finite contexts in HR. Recall that only perfective and/or telic infinitives occurred as complements of overt modals in the heritage data. Associations between non-finiteness, modality, and perfectivity have been documented for early L1 grammars, where the link between non-finiteness and modality has been studied particularly extensively in connection to a well-known cross-linguistic phenomenon in child language – optional occurrence of infinitives in root contexts, typically with a modal interpretation (Wexler, 1994; Hoekstra and Hyams, 1998; Hyams, 2005). Modal interpretations of non-finite forms in early child language have further been linked to perfectivity: for instance, “in the child’s grammar [of Greek] the modal/irrealis interpretation is associated with the perfective verb,” while both perfective and imperfective verbs are used in modal contexts in the adult grammar (Hyams, 2005, p. 302). Hyams (2005) draws an association between modality and perfectivity by positing a common semantic feature shared by the two domains, a transition feature: just like the perfective aspect involves a transition in denoting an event and its termination or closure, deontic or volitional modality “involves a polarity transition, that is, a negative and positive stage of an event” (p. 307). The imperfective, on the other hand, “does not license deontic modality...because it denotes an unbounded process consisting of a sequence of homogeneous events and thus lacks the transition feature” (Hyams, 2005, p. 307). A clustering of properties that share a common linguistic feature (e.g., a transition feature in case of perfectivity, telicity, and modality) is likely what we observe in heritage Russian, where the more prototypical combinations generally seem to be preferred; this distinguishes HR from the baseline variety, where modality to a large extent seems to be independent of both aspect and aspectuality (telicity) and where there is a greater degree of dissociation between the latter two notions⁵.

Data on the distribution of tensed verb forms reveals further interesting differences between the two groups. While untensed forms were altogether preferred by heritage speakers, if a verb did end up being marked for tense, it was most likely present tense marking for heritage speakers, in contrast to the Russian speakers in the control group, who overwhelmingly preferred past tense verbs. The latter finding is consistent with the observation that the past tense occurs more frequently in Russian than any other verb form (Šteinfeldt, 1965).

At first glance, preference for the present over the past tense may seem like a perfectly reasonable avoidance strategy on the part of heritage speakers. In Russian, the perfective-imperfective contrast is expressed in the past tense but not in the present tense: present tense verbs are always imperfective. Thus, the use of a past tense verb in Russian necessarily involves a choice with respect to verbal aspectual form, while imperfectivity is the default aspectual value in the present tense context. In the absence of independent motivation for using the past tense, heritage speakers could simply be avoiding it in order to escape possible complications with aspect in the past tense.

However, further analysis of the issue yields (at least) two objections to such an account. First, it is not entirely clear that the perfective-imperfective aspectual contrast really does exist in the past tense for heritage speakers in the first place. While this contrast is clearly there for the monolingual speakers, who use both perfective (58.5%) and imperfective (41.5%) forms in the past, heritage speakers, as a general rule, do not use imperfectives in the past (less than 2% of the verbs in the heritage data occur in the imperfective past). If past tense verbs are almost always perfective, that is to say, if perfectivity has emerged as a default value of pastness via a covert reorganization of the aspectual system in a heritage grammar, then no real choice (and hence no complexity) with respect to aspectual marking should be involved for heritage speakers in past tense contexts.

Second, independent evidence suggests that heritage speakers of Russian continue to prefer present tense forms even in contexts that specifically call for the use of the past tense (e.g., narratives).

⁵ Recall that in compositionally telic contexts, monolingual speakers produced a nearly equal proportion of perfective and imperfective forms, with no clear bias for one or the other aspect, while heritage speakers strongly preferred perfectives (Fig. 1).

In addressing the issue of attrition versus incomplete acquisition as potential sources of divergence⁶ of a heritage grammar, Polinsky (in press) examined narratives from two heritage speakers of Russian, a 9-year old child and a 23-year old adult (both speakers stopped using Russian actively at around age 5). The narratives were elicited through a book of pictures about a boy looking for his pet frog. Here, I will only consider the data from the adult heritage speaker, whose profile is similar to that of the participants of the present study. Of particular interest to the discussion is the distribution of tensed verb forms in the narrative. When producing the narrative in English, his dominant language, the speaker used all verbs in the past tense (Polinsky, in press, p. 14), as expected. However, the same speaker “showed no consistency whatsoever in the use of tenses in the Russian narrative,” switching between the present, the past, and the future (Polinsky, in press, p. 11). Based on my counts of verbs in the transcript of the story, the following distribution emerged: among tensed verb forms, approximately half were used in the present tense (52.2%), about a third had past tense inflection (28.3%), and about one-fifth had the future tense interpretation (19.4%). These patterns essentially mirror the current findings (cf. the distribution of tensed forms in the sentence-construction data in Fig. 3), suggesting that the underuse of past tense forms in favor of the present in HR may be a robust phenomenon, indicative of a systematic grammatical restructuring.

In studies of finite verb morphology problems in children with SLI, the present tense forms have been reported to be less problematic than regular past tense forms: for example, Hansson and Leonard (2003) found that Swedish-speaking children with SLI had a greater difficulty than the children in the control group in the use of regular past inflections, but not in the use of present-tense inflections (p. 352). Extension of the present tense to other temporal contexts has been observed in early child language acquisition: for instance, in an early L1 grammar of French the present tense forms have been documented to appear first among finite verb forms and continue to be used as default verb forms for some time, presumably because these forms are not fully morphologically specified for tense at the onset of acquisition (De Cat, 2004, p. 63 and references therein).

In their discussion of the meaning of the present tense, Bybee et al. (1994) make the following remarks: “we find it difficult to view the so-called present tense as a ‘tense,’ that is, as having to do primarily with deictic temporal reference... The present is ... typically used for gnomic situations, that is, those that apply to generic subjects and basically hold for all time...” (p. 126); “habitual is one of the default or basic aspectual readings of present tense” (p. 151). In Russian, verbs in the present tense may be used to refer either to ongoing or to habitual situations. A detailed analysis of sentential contexts in which present tense forms were used in the data from heritage speakers reveals that all such sentences had either only a habitual interpretation (69.6%) or were ambiguous between habitual and ongoing/progressive interpretations (30.4%). Crucially, zero percent of the present tense contexts had an unambiguous ongoing reading in the sentences produced by heritage speakers. In contrast, in the data from the Russian controls, 24.4% of present tense forms had an unambiguous ongoing interpretation, 60% of present tense verbs referred to unambiguously habitual or generic situations, and the remaining 15.6% of forms were compatible with both a habitual and an ongoing interpretation. In other words, it seems that while the monolingual grammar of Russian allows for the ongoing and habitual meanings of the present tense, there is no clear evidence in the present data that heritage speakers of Russian used present tense marking in non-habitual or non-generic contexts: instead, the present tense appears to be used by these speakers in its most atemporal sense (cf. Bybee et al., 1994), i.e. in reference to habitual situations or general truths.

⁶ Competing hypotheses have been proposed in recent studies on HLA to account for the lack of full convergence between a heritage grammar and the corresponding baseline system. On the one hand, arrested development has been argued to be the primary source of the divergence: a heritage grammar can be incomplete with respect to the target “because it has ceased to develop some time in childhood and fossilized” (Montrul, 2006, p. 351). In other studies, more emphasis has been placed on the role of the subsequent development and reanalysis of the grammar (often manifested in reorganization and simplification), taking place once the input ceases to exist or becomes limited. For example, Polinsky (in press) suggests that “the adult heritage speaker is not just ‘frozen’ or ‘fossilized’ at the stage of interrupted acquisition... [his or her] grammar develops as a result of a reanalysis of the mental representation rescued from the childhood years [...], presumably shaped by the interference from English and some universal principles governing language development with limited input” (pp. 15-16). Although the two approaches are certainly not irreconcilable, each one offers a particular set of predictions with respect to the outcome of HLA, a grammar of an adult heritage speaker.

High frequency of future tense forms in the heritage data may be a reflection of a similar tendency, i.e. a more general preference towards atemporal categories in a heritage grammar: as Bybee et al. (1994) observe, “future is less a temporal category and more a category resembling agent-oriented and epistemic modality” (p. 280), or, in the words of Lyons (1977), “[f]uturity is never a purely temporal concept; it necessarily includes an element of prediction or some related modal notion” (p. 677). In his analysis of the present and future tenses in Russian, Forsyth (1970) describes a special relationship that exists between the present tense and the simple future in Russian and notes that these categories share not only historical origins but also many functions in modern Russian: for instance, perfective future forms are frequently used without future meanings to describe, e.g., habitual situations and general truths (p. 119-120).

Early analyses of the Russian tense system have described it as a privative opposition between the present and past (or ‘non-present’), where the present was analyzed as the unmarked member of the opposition and hence referred to as the unmarked tense (Ferrell, 1953 in Forsyth, 1970, p. 120). In this classification, the non-present tense included the imperfective and perfective past tense forms (such as *reshal.IMP* – ‘(He) was deciding’ and *reshil.PFV* – ‘(He) decided’), while the unmarked tense consisted of the imperfective present (*reshaju.IMP* – ‘(I am) deciding’) and the perfective future (*reshu.PFV* – ‘(I) will decide’).

Under a view of present and future as not purely temporal categories (Bybee et al., 1994; Lyons, 1977), or put differently, as not the most prototypical deictic temporal categories, and under the assumption that the present and (simple) future together form the so-called ‘unmarked tense’ in Russian (Ferrell, 1953), a fairly high frequency of present and future (rather than past) forms, alongside a comparatively high frequency of non-finite forms, could be indicative of an overall preference towards the unmarked in a heritage grammar.

To conclude this section, I turn once again to the main hypothesis of this study, which predicted a close clustering of the more prototypical properties in the heritage grammar, in contrast to an expected wider range of combinations in the monolingual data. The hypothesis was (once again) corroborated with regard to the distribution of telic and atelic predicates across past and present contexts, illustrated in Fig. 4. These data essentially mirror the patterns shown in Fig. 1 for the distribution of perfective and imperfective forms in telic and atelic contexts, but with an interesting twist, if the monolingual data are also taken into account. In both cases, heritage speakers exhibited a limited flexibility, compared to the monolingual speakers, in the use of aspectual and tense markers in telic and atelic contexts. In that sense, heritage speakers differed systematically from the monolingual controls with respect to the marking of aspect and tense; however, the difference between the two groups in the former case was one of quality, while in the latter case, one of degree. That is, in preferring perfective aspectual marking with compositionally telic predicates, heritage speakers exhibited a unique rule-like pattern of aspectual marking not attested in the monolingual data, where there was no preference for either perfective or imperfective forms in the telic condition. In contrast, the patterns of tense marking in the heritage data generally echoed, albeit in a more categorical way, the distributional bias that was already present in the monolingual Russian data. I attribute this contrast to the idea that while the encoding of telicity is a cross-linguistic parameter, with different settings for English and Slavic (e.g., Slabakova, 1999), the encoding of tense is not parameterized between English and Russian. This creates a possibility for potential transfer from the ambient language in the former, but not in the latter case.

3. Conclusion

In this work I have undertaken a non-error-based approach to the study of the tense-aspect system of heritage Russian, which has allowed me to examine some systematic shifts in the heritage grammar that, in the absence of overt errors, may not have been detectable otherwise. In my view, detecting and analyzing such shifts may prove to be a valuable contribution to our understanding of heritage grammars as complex dynamic systems; coupled with the analyses of explicit surface deviations from the baseline, work on covert restructuring in heritage grammars may provide the necessary cues with respect to the nature, mechanism, sequential order, and directionality of grammatical development in a HLA context.

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