

## Testing the Linguistic Competence of Persian Heritage Speakers

Although it is agreed that heritage language learners have a linguistic profile different from L2 learners, language-specific comprehensive studies are lacking. Most of the literature on the linguistic knowledge of heritage speakers has focused on issues in language instruction and the discussion is often impressionistic and anecdotal. Existing proficiency tests measure learners in a heuristic manner based on their performance on functional tasks and generally require reading and writing which excludes heritage learners or puts them at a disadvantage. This paper describes a comprehensive test battery to measure the linguistic competence of Persian (Farsi) heritage speakers. It differs from previous test designs in both its scope and delivery by separately targeting 60 distinct linguistic features in the areas of phonology, morphology, syntax, collocation and lexis, presented in an oral-aural format. The results of this study will help address the needs pointed out by Polinsky (2005) for descriptive generalizations on the structure of heritage languages which could be used to design further studies, to test interference from the dominant language, and to inform pedagogical strategies.

The test is a computer delivered 4-hour battery for Persian language composed of a variety of psycholinguistic measures to target specific linguistic features, chosen with a consideration of the kinds of items discussed in the literature as being particularly salient for heritage learners. Subjects fall into three groups: native speakers, English-speaking learners of Persian, and heritage speakers. The items were developed to provide empirical data to test the claims made in the literature by comparing the results across the three groups.

Preliminary results of the test battery respond to claims in the literature that heritage speakers:

- (1) have knowledge of phonetic and sound patterns that L2 speakers might never obtain;
- (2) tend to avoid complex and elaborate use of grammatical morphology;
- (3) are not expected to display high-level language proficiency which is characterized by more complex sentence structures, register variation, more frequent pro-drop cases, and less code-switching;
- (4) are more comfortable than L2 learners with complex structures that are frequent in colloquial varieties;
- (5) display overgeneralization in tense and aspect, and simplification of verbal classification and syntactic patterns;
- (6) display interference effects, such as lexical extension or syntactic calquing, different from L2 learners;
- (7) are deficient in vocabulary used in formal or written discourse.

Tasks used include grammaticality judgment, paradigm elicitation, picture naming, phoneme monitoring, elicited imitation, lexical decision, error correction, multiple choice and speech perception in noise. Length of utterance, frequency, stylistic variation, number of morphemes, background of the subjects and other interfering factors are controlled for.

The Persian battery is a unique effort to provide a broad description of heritage language learners' linguistic competence, in particular their knowledge of grammatical forms, register and dialectal use, and provides descriptive generalizations for specific linguistic features. Comparisons of all such phenomena between heritage speakers and L2 as well as L1 speakers could provide important insights for linguistic theory, assessment strategies, and pedagogical practices.

**Reference**

Polinsky, Maria. 2005. Word Class Distinctions in an Incomplete Grammar.