

The Subjunctive in North American Icelandic

Contrary to concerns about the future of the subjunctive in Icelandic, recent studies indicate that it is by no means threatened, even though there are signs of changes in the distribution of the indicative vs. the subjunctive (Þórðardóttir, 2006, 2017; Þránínsson, Angantýsson & Sigurðsson, 2015). However, Þórsdóttir's (2018) recent study has shown a correlation between high exposure to English and problems with the use of the subjunctive. It is thus interesting to explore the subjunctive mood in North American Icelandic, where great exposure to English is unavoidable.

The study is concerned with the linguistic competence of adult early bilingual North Americans who speak Icelandic as a minority language. Looking at data from 50 North American Icelanders gives us some idea of the status of mood in heritage Icelandic. Preliminary results indicate that the speakers can—in most cases—choose the correct form of the verb when given two options (88% of the time), and when they fail to do so, they do not necessarily prefer the indicative form over the subjunctive. However, there are only a few examples of the subjunctive being used in speech; 73% of the Icelandic heritage speakers used the indicative form predominantly. However, this is not surprising as the Icelandic subjunctive is most common in subordinate clauses and not all of the heritage speakers use subordinate clauses at all, limiting the possibilities of the subjunctive. Nevertheless, when we look at sentences in the data where the subjunctive would be required in Icelandic, we see that the heritage speakers correctly use it 63% of the time but fail at doing so in 37% of the examples. This indicates a problem in the production of the subjunctive, but unlike what Montrul (2007) found, there are considerably less signs of problems with comprehension. Notice however that nothing indicates that these are direct influences from English even though two speakers use the subjunctive for habitual past as is common in English but not in Icelandic.

The fact that Icelandic heritage speakers have problems with the production of the subjunctive does not come as a surprise as Icelandic expresses modality morphologically on the verb in the cases of indicative, subjunctive and imperative mood. Therefore, the speaker needs to inflect the verb for mood and the morphological pattern quite often involves sound changes in the stem (e.g. *fer, færi, farðu* = 'go'), making the mood production morphologically rather complex. Furthermore, the subjunctive morphology most often appears in subordinate clauses, making them also syntactically complex. It further complicates the matter that the lexical selection of the subjunctive is not that simple, as the realis/irrealis oppositions between the indicative mood and the subjunctive is only partially accurate as in many other languages (Quer, 1998). The morphological, syntactical, pragmatic and semantical production of the subjunctive therefore provides quite a challenge for language learners leading to a rather late completion of mood acquisition, which again could affect the acquisition process of the heritage learner who is only schooled in English.

Studies have shown (Jóhannsdóttir 2018, In Press) that unlike mood, tense and aspect in North American Icelandic shows little sign of loss or incomplete acquisition. However, that is not surprising as studies have shown that when grammatical and morphological categories within the verbal domain are compared, mood seems to be significantly more affected than aspect in heritage speakers (e.g. Silva-Corvalán 1994, 2003, Montrul 2009). In fact, Montrul (2015) has suggested that mood might be the verbal category that is most affected in heritage languages. The distinction between the indicative and subjunctive mood seems particularly problematic. The results here, compared with Jóhannsdóttir's results on tense and aspect, are in accordance with the Regression Hypothesis (Jakobson, 1941) which relates order of acquisition to order of language loss. However, it is also in accordance with the Interfaces Hypothesis (Tsimplici & Sorace, 2006) which maintains that there are important developmental differences between interfaces, and particularly when taking into account White's (2009) survey on L2 interfaces that shows that the syntax–morphology interface is particularly vulnerable.

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