Language acquisition or language change ... or both? Gender and case in new speaker varieties of Wymysorys

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One persistent hypothesis in language evolution is that child language acquisition is the locus of language change. But in settings where a community's speech behavior is stable and there is neutral or high prestige associated with the language variety, linguistic change is slow to the point of being unnoticeable among living people. Children —even multilingual children— tend to acquire target language structures with a high degree of accuracy. Noticeable language changes, especially those involving language structure, are hypothesized to occur more readily when a substantial part of the speech community consists of second-language (L2) speakers, who introduce patterns from their other language(s). However in multilingual situations where language change occurs more quickly, the precise role of acquisition is empirically elusive, partially because of differing research agendas and methodological approaches among scientists interested in language change and those interested in language acquisition. The former often rely on historical records of language use at different time periods in order to *reconstruct* the trajectory of language change, while actual observation is limited to apparent time samples, which can often not be taken at face value to represent changes in progress. While the latter rely heavily on observation of individuals' developing competence and eventual idiosyncrasies, the real time approach is often limited by general practicalities of life and research funding, such that results are limited in scope (the period of acquisition), generalizability (small speaker samples), and are not able to corroborate the spread of idiosyncrasies to a wider speech community.

In endangered language settings where revitalization activities are taking place, new speakers provide an ideal context to overcome some these limitations to the understanding the relationship between acquisition and change. *New speaker* here refers to an individual who takes it upon his or herself to learn and use an endangered language, often with the explicit purpose of 'saving' that language. The new speaker often occupies an active, or even key role in the community and new speakers of endangered languages tend to represent larger and more influential proportion of the overall speech community than learners of non-threatened languages. These observations lead to the hypothesis, around which this work is based, namely that the study of new speaker groups will allow for both observation of the instantiation of linguistic innovation via processes of language acquisition and the spread of these innovations within the speech community.

This lecture will present ongoing research on new speaker varieties of Wymysorys, a language spoken primarily in the town of Wilamowice in southern Poland. Transmission of Wymysorys was stifled due to the socio-political climate in Poland following the Second World War, but grassroots efforts of the last decade or so have garnered relative success, resulting in a core group of new speakers and learners. Analysis will specifically address the domains of grammatical gender and case. The high degree of complexity and entrenchment of case and gender in language systems implicates them as likely host domains for innovation during the acquisition process. On the one hand, the data clearly illustrate a stage-like progression in acquisition, as would be expected on the basis of comparison to other similar languages, while on the other hand, there also appears to be some degree of idiosyncratic restructuring within case and gender systems. Although it remains to be seen whether these idiosyncrasies will take hold in the wider speech community, the possibility of observing the instantiation and spread of innovation is an exiting prospect that speaks to the potential of new speaker studies to contribute to understanding the underlying mechanisms of language change.