

Morphosyntactic Convergence vs. Pragmatic Drift: A Contrastive Evaluation of Contact-Induced Grammaticalization Pathways in Heritage and Immigrant Bilingual Varieties

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Abstract. This study investigates competing theoretical frameworks for explaining grammatical restructuring in heritage and immigrant bilingual varieties, with particular focus on contact-induced grammaticalization as a driver of morphosyntactic convergence and pragmatic drift. Drawing on a cross-linguistic corpus of spontaneous speech and elicited narratives from 214 bilingual speakers across four typologically distinct language pairings, we apply variationist sociolinguistic analysis alongside Optimality-Theoretic constraint ranking to evaluate the predictive power of each framework. Results indicate that morphosyntactic convergence models account more reliably for nominal and verbal paradigm erosion, whereas pragmatic drift frameworks better capture discourse-level restructuring in evidentiality and aspect marking. The findings carry significant implications for theories of language attrition, bilingual grammars, and heritage language pedagogy, and challenge monolithic accounts of contact-induced change.

Keywords: contact-induced grammaticalization, morphosyntactic convergence, pragmatic drift, heritage bilingualism, variationist sociolinguistics, language attrition, Optimality Theory, bilingual grammar, discourse-level restructuring

Introduction

The study of language contact has long occupied a central position in theoretical and applied linguistics, yet the mechanisms underlying grammatical restructuring in bilingual communities remain a subject of sustained scholarly debate. As globalization accelerates patterns of migration, diaspora formation, and multilingual urbanization throughout the 2020s, the linguistic outcomes of sustained contact between typologically diverse languages have gained renewed urgency. Heritage speakers—individuals raised in households where a minority language is spoken alongside a dominant societal language—represent a particularly salient population for testing competing models of grammatical change, precisely because their grammars exhibit simultaneous pressures from language attrition, incomplete acquisition, and innovative restructuring rooted in cross-linguistic transfer. Two principal theoretical paradigms have emerged to account for such restructuring. The morphosyntactic convergence hypothesis, developed most rigorously within generative and typological traditions, posits that contact varieties selectively realign their grammatical features toward those of the dominant language, driven by frequency effects, feature economy, and the gradual erosion of marked morphological categories. By contrast, the pragmatic drift hypothesis, elaborated within functional and interactional linguistics, foregrounds the reorganization of discourse-pragmatic functions—notably evidentiality, aspect, and information structure—as the primary locus of contact-induced change, arguing that syntactic form follows communicative function rather than structural template matching. Despite extensive empirical work on individual bilingual varieties, no systematic contrastive evaluation of these two frameworks has been conducted across multiple language pairings under a unified methodological protocol. This gap is consequential: the choice of analytical framework determines not only theoretical conclusions about the nature of bilingual competence but also practical decisions in heritage language education, language revitalization policy, and the design of diagnostic assessments for bilingual learners. The present article addresses this lacuna through a large-scale, corpus-driven investigation spanning four heritage bilingual communities. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of morphosyntactic convergence and pragmatic drift, situating each within broader debates on language change and bilingual grammar. Section 3 details the corpus design, speaker sampling methodology, and the variationist and Optimality-Theoretic analytical tools employed. Section 4 presents quantitative findings on nominal paradigm erosion, verbal aspect marking, and evidential particle distribution across the four language pairings. Section 5 offers a comparative evaluation of the two frameworks' explanatory adequacy, and Section 6 draws theoretical and pedagogical conclusions, proposing an integrative model that recognizes domain-specific explanatory primacy for each approach.

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