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## HOW TO ASK FOR A FAVOR: A PILOT STUDY IN HERITAGE RUSSIAN PRAGMATICS<sup>1</sup>

Данная статья рассматривает способ выражения просьб на русском языке взрослыми детьми русскоязычных эмигрантов в США или ЛУРаами (людьми с унаследованным русским). Хотя уже много внимания было уделено грамматике русского языка в условиях американской эмиграции, прагматические знания ЛУРов оставались до недавнего времени неисследованными. Пилотное исследование, описанное в этой статье, показывает, что способ выражения просьбы у взрослых детей эмигрантов отличается от тех норм, которые используют их ровесники в России, преобладанием модального *можно* (которое превращается в их языке в маркер вежливой просьбы) и *пожалуйста* даже в косвенных просьбах-вопросах. Автор предлагает на обсуждение объяснение причин таких изменений в речевом поведении ЛУРов.

In recent years, the field of Russian as a heritage language (HL) has attracted the attention of several prominent Slavicists and linguists, such as Maria Polinsky, Olga Kagan, Ben Rifkin, and Richard Robin. These researchers have focused on the issues of classification and placement of Russian heritage speakers (Kagan 2000, 2005, 2006), methodology of teaching Russian as a HL (Kagan, Akishina & Robin 2002), and largely on describing grammatical competences of Russian heritage speakers (Polinsky 1997, 2000, 2005, 2006, 2008a,b; Bermel & Kagan 2000, Kagan & Dillon 2010).

The research carried out by these scholars has contributed greatly to our understanding of the structure of heritage Russian and serves as a basis for pedagogical considerations in heritage language education. However, one area has been overlooked in HL research thus far. Since Hymes (1966) it has been well established that grammatical competence does not adequately describe the complexity of a speaker's linguistic behavior. Performance is based not only on the knowledge of grammar rules and the ability to form cohesive and coherent sentences, but also on the knowledge of communicative strategies and the appropriateness of linguistic forms. This paper attempts to fill the gap in the study of language contact, bilingualism, and heritage languages by bringing attention to the pragmatics of heritage Russian.

Specifically, I will present and analyze the results of a pilot study which investigates communicative norms of heritage Russian, using requests as an example. Section One will examine the place of heritage languages in the U.S. and will describe some characteristics of the Russian-speaking population. Section Two will give a definition of the term "heritage speaker" while Section Three will briefly discuss language characteristics of Russian heritage speaker. Section Four will present the motivation, scope and research questions of the pilot study, and Section Five will provide information on conventionalized polite indirect requests in English and Russian. Section Six will describe the study participants and its design, and finally Section Seven will describe results, discuss the findings, and provide explanations for the observed phenomenon.

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## 1. The Place of Heritage Languages in the U.S.; Russian as a Heritage Language

According to the U.S. Census 2000, immigrants comprise 11% of the total U.S. population, an unprecedented number in the U.S. history (Kagan 2001: 507). Russian ranks ninth among the most commonly spoken non-English languages in the U.S. The Census lists 704,000 home speakers of Russian while the most recent 2006 Community Survey data indicate that the number of Russian speakers has increased even further to 823,210 (Potowski 2010).

Researchers recognize a number of separate waves of Russian/Soviet immigration (Andrews 1998, Земская 2001), of which the last two waves are the largest. Immigrants of the third wave left the USSR during the late 1970s and early 1980s. These immigrants were predominantly Jewish, and their departure was caused by the institutionalized anti-Semitism of the Soviet Union. There were also many Jews in the subsequent fourth immigration wave, but the reasons for leaving the Soviet Union were different and more diverse. In addition to the continuing anti-Semitism, they included the post-perestroika social and economic decline throughout the entire Soviet space, the lifting of restrictions on emigration for anybody who was politically and religiously persecuted, newly granted freedom for former Soviet citizens to study and marry abroad, and the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a result, immigrants of the fourth wave belong to various ethnic groups and have complex identities which include both a linguistic (Russian speaking) and an ethnic component (Armenian, Ukrainian, Jewish<sup>2</sup>).

A substantial percentage of third- and fourth-wave immigrants hold college degrees, and can be characterized as educated speakers familiar with the standards of the contemporary Russian literary language (Andrews 1998). Many of them try to maintain cultural ties with Russia by watching Russian TV, movies, reading Russian-language publications and communicating with relatives still living in Russia and other post-Soviet states through e-mail.

Many of the third- and fourth-wave immigrants have settled in large metropolitan areas in the U.S., such as New York, Los Angeles, Seattle and Philadelphia where they have opened restaurants, food stores, medical and legal practices, Russian language day care centers, and private educational institutions and after-school programs. However, with the exception of Brighton Beach in New York, the majority of Russian speakers do not form congregated communities (Kagan & Dillon 2010).

Despite some favorable conditions for language maintenance, such as high level of education and the ability to maintain a linguistic and cultural connection with the native country, the language spoken by Russian immigrants of the late 20th century and their children undergoes grammatical, lexical and functional reduction, and has distinct features separating it from the Russian spoken in the Russian Federation. Polinsky (1997, 2000) argues, in fact, that there exist two varieties of Russian in the U.S.: *Émigré Russian (ER)* and *American Russian (AR)*. Speakers of the first variety include immigrants whose schooling has largely been completed in Russia before the emigration. Their speech is characterized by heavy lexical borrowing and extensive code-switching (Andrews 1998; Polinsky 2000) as well as some syntactic changes (Polinsky 2000<sup>3</sup>). Speakers of the second variety consist of children who arrived in the U.S. with their parents before the critical acquisition age (and therefore, their schooling took place predominantly in English), and children born in the U.S. to Russian-speaking families. It is this second group, bearers of American Russian, who are considered heritage speakers and

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<sup>2</sup> For a number of reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper to explain, Jewish has become an ethno-cultural identity, not a religious one, in the Soviet Union. Most Soviet Jews, however, are assimilated, and do not differ much linguistically, or even culturally, from ethnic Russians. Regardless of the question of ethnicity/religion, the overwhelming majority of third-wavers and more recent immigrants (fourth-wavers) speak Russian as their first and only language.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the disappearance of the marker of reported speech *ли* and its replacement by an English calque *если: я не знаю, если он захочет пойти в кино* (instead of *я не знаю, захочет ли он пойти в кино*).

who are of interest to the current study. Their language characteristics will be considered in Section Three.

## 2. Definition of a Heritage Speaker

The term “heritage speaker” appeared in the American sociolinguistic and SLA literature relatively recently. These individuals have also been called “native speakers” or “bilinguals” (Valdés 2001, Polinsky 2000) as well as “semi-speakers” (Dorian in Valdés 2001). However, the former term is inappropriate because it asserts that heritage speakers have the same mastery of their home language(s) as monolingual speakers. In addition, this term does not capture the sense that heritage languages often fulfill only a reduced number of functions (e.g., personal communication, but not negotiation of a sale), a feature which by no means characterizes a monolingual native speaker of the same language. The latter term, “bilinguals”, also presents problems, as scholars often disagree with regards to what levels of language skills must constitute bilingual competency.

Valdés (2000, 2001) offers the most widely accepted definition of heritage speakers as individuals “who [were] raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who [speak] or merely [understand] the heritage language, and who [are] to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (2001: 39–40)<sup>4</sup>. Heritage speakers have varying proficiencies in the two languages: they use one language as primary and the other as secondary.

An important feature of heritage speakers’ linguistic profile is a functional, stylistic and linguistic reduction of the home language. The reduction has several causes. First, heritage speakers in the U.S. usually receive education only in English and, therefore, become literate only in that language; hence, they lose some channels of expression in the mother tongue (Valdés 2000). Second, heritage languages are often represented by the colloquial register (i.e. informal language used only for interpersonal interactions), which may be, and often is, a stigmatized dialectal variety. Children who grow up in a heritage language environment have access only to the dialect of their parents; hence, we find a reduction of the full dialectal range of the heritage language (Valdés 2000). This reduction is augmented by the absence of schooling in the home language and lack of access to the high register variety (such as the language of TV or radio programs). Finally, because heritage speakers do not have full access to all varieties and registers of the language, they possess only a reduced repertoire of language skills. For example, they often know “baby words”, but not political terminology. The reduction affects not only the functions of the language, but also its grammatical and lexical structure. Without a system of checks and repairs, such as schooling, speakers of heritage languages never develop a full command of all grammatical and stylistic forms available to monolingual speakers (Polinsky 2000). However, despite these reductions, even low-proficiency heritage speakers often have sufficient communicative competence in the home language, and frequently place much higher in school or university language programs than their English monolingual counterparts who started their language study post puberty.

In sum, a heritage speaker is an early bilingual who was exposed to one language (minority or immigrant) in childhood, but then switched to a different (majority) language which became functionally dominant for this speaker; and who still speaks the home language with some degree of proficiency or at least understands it. As a result of the interruption in language acquisition, the speaker's first (or home) language is weakened, and undergoes morpho-

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, the word “bilingual” resurfaces in this definition, and Valdés offers a comprehensive explanation. She argues that a bilingual person does not equal two monolinguals combined into one individual. She suggests that there exist various types of bilingualism, and that bilingual speakers form a continuum of proficiencies in the two languages. An English speaker may only understand spoken Russian, but he is clearly more bilingual than a person who cannot understand a single word. This hypothetical English speaker does not fit a definition of a perfect bilingual nor does he fit the definition of a perfect monolingual.

logical and lexical restructuring. Such speakers are of interest to the fields of linguistics and SLA because they offer researchers an opportunity to investigate specific ways in which languages change in a contact situation and refine our understanding of such concepts as native language stability, ultimate attainment under complete and incomplete acquisition, and universal properties of natural languages.

### 3. Language Characteristics of Russian Heritage Speakers

Heritage Russian in the USA is represented by speakers of AR. These are second (and one-and-a-half) generation immigrants, children of Russian-speaking immigrants who receive most of their schooling in the U.S. (Polinsky 1997, 2000). With rare exceptions, these children grow up hearing mostly ER in their homes and, therefore, regard it as the standard of spoken Russian. In line with the general definition of heritage language, AR is a "restricted language with no register variation and with a grammar of its own" (Polinsky 2000: 451).

AR speakers confuse familiar and formal second-person pronouns: they prefer *ты* for any situation, but if corrected, start using *вы* indiscriminately. They often overuse *привет* and *как дела* even in formal situations (Polinsky 1997, 2000). On the lexical level we observe a reduction of the vocabulary range. Since the main exposure of immigrant children to Russian happens in early childhood, they often consider words in so-called "parent-talk" as normal lexical items. As a result, they overuse diminutives even in those situations that clearly call for standard non-diminutive forms (Polinsky 2000, Bermel & Kagan 2000). Lexical borrowings and calques from English also exist in AR, but as Polinsky (2000) points out, AR speakers tend not to code-switch, unlike ER speakers.

The main language reduction in AR happens on the grammatical level. According to Polinsky (1997, 2000, 2005, 2006, 2008a,b,c), the following features characterize the AR grammatical system: 1) reduction of the case system; 2) lexicalization of verbal aspect and the disappearance of aspectual pairs; 3) reduction of verbal conjugation paradigms which leads to the lack of verbal agreement; 4) absence of the subjunctive and the conditional; 5) disappearance of reflexive verbs; 6) prevalence of so-called resumptive pronouns (defined as "clause-internal pronouns related to an NP within the same clause" (Polinsky 2000: 458) co-referenced with subjects within the same clause, and 7) use of repetition of resumptive pronouns as a strategy for maintaining discourse.

### 4. Motivation, Scope and Research Questions of the Study

The current study investigates one aspect of pragmatic competence of heritage speakers of Russian, namely how these speakers formulate requests. The choice of the requestive speech acts is not accidental. First, requests are pervasive in a language and represent one of the most risky communicative behaviors: one exposes oneself in an effort to get somebody else to perform an action for the requester's benefit (and perhaps not for the immediate benefit of the hearer). Second, the syntactic form of a prototypical Russian request is different from a prototypical English request (Mills 1991). Finally, there already exists important research relating to how Russian native speakers construct requests (Mills 1991, 1992, 1993) which serves as a foundation for the study. The following research questions were posited:

- How exactly does the impoverished linguistic system of heritage speakers of Russian influence their communicative competence?
- What is the exact nature of the difference in the construction of a requestive act between heritage speakers and native speakers of Russian?
- How can these differences be explained?

Given the degree of similarity, the subtlety of the differences between formulation of requests in the two languages, and the impoverished morphology of heritage speakers, at least some

divergence from the baseline is expected, specifically, in the use of morpho-syntactic and lexical means of expressing conventionalized politeness.

## 5. Conventionalized Polite Indirect Requests in English and Russian

When a speaker asks the hearer to perform an action which will benefit the speaker and may inconvenience the hearer, indirect strategies are universally employed by speakers of various languages. Speakers of both Russian and English routinely choose a particular type of indirect strategy for making requests, namely interrogatives. When using the indirect request, both Russian and English speakers question the hearer's ability to perform the desired action. While English has no special means of differentiating between a true information-seeking question and an indirect request, Russian employs the negative particle *не*. Compare:

- (1) *Вы закроете окно?* vs. *Вы не закроете окно?* and
- (2) *Вы можете закрыть окно?* vs. *Вы не можете закрыть окно?*

To mitigate the imposition, speakers of both languages further employ morpho-syntactic means. English routinely uses the mood to soften a request. Compare

- (3) *Can you close the window?* vs. **Could** *you close the window?*

Russian speakers also use the mood, but as was stated above, the verb almost always has to be negated:

- (4) *Вы не можете закрыть окно?* vs. *Вы не могли бы закрыть окно?*

In addition to the morpho-syntactic means of mitigating a request, there are lexical politeness markers available to speakers of both languages: namely, *please* and *пожалуйста*. The distribution of these politeness markers is quite different in requests in the two languages. Both direct (imperatives) and indirect (interrogatives) requests in English can be accompanied by *please*. The marker is much more frequent in direct requests: in fact, without *please* an imperative utterance will most likely sound like a command, the degree of imposition will not be mitigated, and even the nicest intonation may not remove the perception of rudeness. *Please* is also quite often used in English indirect requests: e.g., Michigan corpus of academic spoken English (MICASE) indicates that the marker is present in 35% of conventionalized indirect requests: *Could you please close the window?* In contrast, Russian speakers rarely use *пожалуйста* in interrogatives, and its use in requests is inappropriate:

- (5) #*Вы не можете (могли бы), пожалуйста, закрыть окно?*

The search of the sub-corpus of spoken language in routine situations of the Russian National Corpus has not yielded any combinations of politeness markers and the interrogative.

Another feature that distinguishes some Russian requests from English has to do with the distribution of the impersonal modal *можно* which has no direct equivalent in English. The word *можно* is used in Russian in particular types of request, namely requests for permission. While the combination of *можно* and *пожалуйста* is possible in some contexts, it is mostly judged as unacceptable or at least "strange" by native speakers. When the speaker makes a request to have a particular object (i.e., noun), the combination is mostly acceptable:

- (6) *Можно, пожалуйста, булочку?*

However, when the speaker is requesting some action (i.e., a verb), the combination is less desirable or even unacceptable:

- (7) #*Можно, пожалуйста, взять Ваш конспект?*

An English speaker may also ask for permission by employing the modal *may* which unlike Russian combines nicely with the lexical politeness marker: *May I please have a cigarette?*

A final point of difference between Russian and English requests is the preferred orientation of the requests. While both languages tolerate speaker and hearer orientation, English

prefers to focus on the speaker (*Could I borrow your notes?*) while Russian tends to use hearer orientation (*Ты не дашь мне конспект?*).

To sum up, Russian and English are similar in their preference for conventionalized indirect strategies of request in situations of asking for a favor, namely the interrogative. Both languages can use the subjective to further mitigate the requests, but only Russian routinely negates the verb (a feature that seems to differentiate a conventionalized Russian indirect request from an information-seeking question). The two languages differ in the distribution of lexical politeness marker: English speakers normally use *please* with the interrogative whereas Russian speakers restrict the use of *пожалуйста* to the imperative (Mills 1993: 111). Furthermore, Russian employs the impersonal modal to formulate a request for permission which is not easily combined with the lexical politeness marker *пожалуйста*. The impersonal modal does not have a direct translation to English. Finally, the two languages differ in the orientation of requests, English speakers preferring to focus on themselves when asking a favor, and Russian speakers addressing the hearer.

## 6. Study Participants and Design

The pilot study involved 10 heritage speakers of Russian, between 18 and 22 years of age, all college students with at least some reading proficiency in Russian, and 10 age-matched native speakers of Russian. The latter group is very homogenous, consisting of monolingual Russian college students and recent graduates who have never spent any significant amount of time in a foreign language environment. An average heritage speaker in this study immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 3.5 and claims to use mostly Russian with parents (85% with the mother and 83% with the father), only Russian with grandparents (95%) and mostly English with siblings (Russian only 19% of the time). Half of the heritage participants consider Russian to be their native language, but speak it at a much slower rate than their native speaker counterparts: 88 words per minute (in comparison to an average Russian native speaker's rate of 105 words per minute).

The data for the study were elicited through role enactments which allowed participants to enact a social situation together with the interviewer and to produce speech samples that maximally resemble naturally occurring speech (Trosborg 1995). Role enactments were conducted as one-on-one sessions with the researcher, recorded and transcribed. They were then analyzed using a modified version of the CCSARP taxonomy (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989). Each head act was analyzed in terms of its syntactic form, morpho-syntactic and lexical politeness markers, and speaker/hearer orientation of the request.

Two social scenarios prompting the use of a requestive act were used. In the first situation, a student asks his classmate to borrow lecture notes after a missed class and before a unit test. In the second scenario, a student asks his instructor to borrow a rare book that is not available otherwise. Therefore, the two scenarios differ in the degree of imposition and the social distance of the interlocutors.

## 7. Study Results and Discussion

In the first scenario, the two groups did not differ significantly in the syntactic form of the head act produced. Most of the participants used an interrogative, thus predictably choosing the conventionalized indirect strategy (70% of native speakers and 80% of heritage speakers). For example, a native speaker produced the following request,

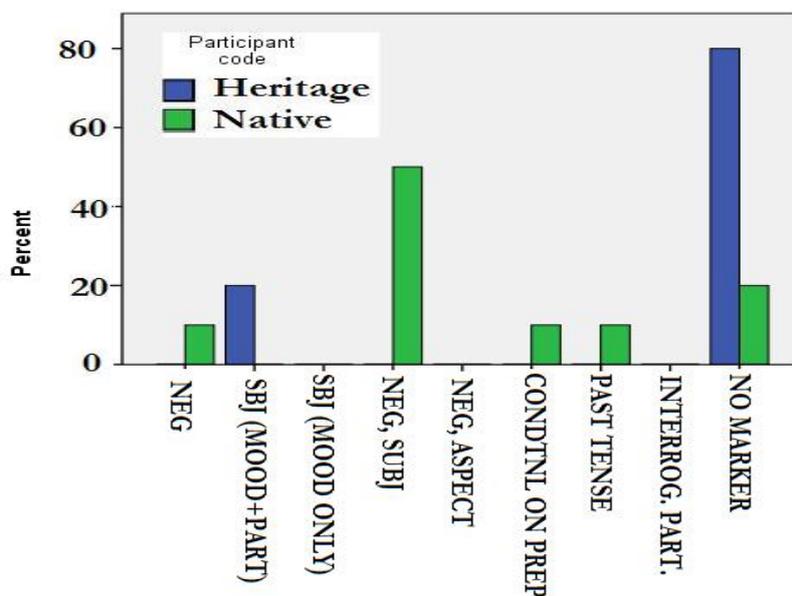
(8) *Ты не могла бы мне конспект одолжить?*

whereas a heritage speaker asked,

(9) *Можно мне, пожалуйста, посмотреть конспект урока?*

Other forms included an imperative and an embedded performative for native speakers (*Я хотела попросить у тебя на один вечер конспект*), and an embedded interrogative for heritage speakers (*Я хотел узнать, если ты можешь, пожалуйста, дать мне конспект*).

As is obvious from these examples, the difference between the two groups lies in the use of morpho-syntactic and lexical politeness markers. To form conventionalized indirect requests, native speakers predictably used the subjunctive and the negative particle while most heritage speakers did not use either the mood or negation (Fig. 1):



Instead, heritage speakers relied on lexical politeness markers, most frequently combining the impersonal modal *можно* and the marker *пожалуйста*, and producing the following utterances:

(10) *Можно мне, пожалуйста, посмотреть конспект урока?* and

(11) *Можно я, пожалуйста, на несколько часов возьму и перепишу конспект?*

In fact, 50% of heritage speakers combined *можно* and *пожалуйста* whereas native speakers never produced such combination of words<sup>5</sup>.

In terms of the orientation of requests, heritage speakers favored the speaker's point of view, focusing attention on themselves and their needs (90%):

(12) *Можно я, пожалуйста, на несколько часов возьму и перепишу конспект?*

Meanwhile, native speakers focused predominantly on the hearer (60%):

(13) *Ты не могла бы мне конспект одолжить?*

This latter strategy of de-emphasizing the speaker's needs seems generally typical of Russian speech etiquette; American English speech etiquette is based more on directly reflecting the needs of the speaker (Wierzbicka 1991), and this finds its reflection in the pragmatics of Heritage Russian. This difference in speech etiquette, of which requests are just one component, is to a certain extent responsible for the common stereotypes of the two nations: ever since de Tocqueville's foray into the young New World, the Americans have been viewed as selfish, inconsiderate and too individualistic<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the outsiders have long perceived the Russians as painfully indirect, pretentious, and obsequious (Kennan 1971). As my comparison of the two request paradigms shows, these perceptions are deeply rooted in language use, and heritage speakers bring the American pragmatics into their Russian usage.

In the second scenario, where a student has to ask his professor for a rare book, heritage speakers also differ significantly from native speakers. The two groups are most similar only

<sup>5</sup> One native speaker used the impersonal modal by itself *можно*: *Можно у тебя взять конспект?*

<sup>6</sup> "Equality places men side by side, unconnected by any common tie" (de Tocqueville 1835/2000: 194).

in the syntactic type of the request: both choose conventionalized indirect request strategy, and therefore, use the interrogative (native speakers – 90%, heritage speakers – 60%). However, heritage speakers also employ a different indirect strategy that is unique to their group (30%) – an embedded interrogative, which seems to be a transfer effect from English:

(14) *Я хотел спросить, если я могу на пару дней ее (книгу) использовать.*

Compare with English:

(15) *I wanted to ask you if I could borrow this book.*

Most likely, sensing the increased social distance between interlocutors in scenario 2, heritage speakers searched for ways to significantly mitigate their request, and English pragmatics suggested a safe strategy: an embedded interrogative.

To mitigate requests, native speakers continued to use the subjunctive and predictably negated the verbs (50%):

(16) *Вы не могли бы одолжить мне ее (книгу) на пару вечеров?*

Some also used the very formal interrogative marker *ли* (10%):

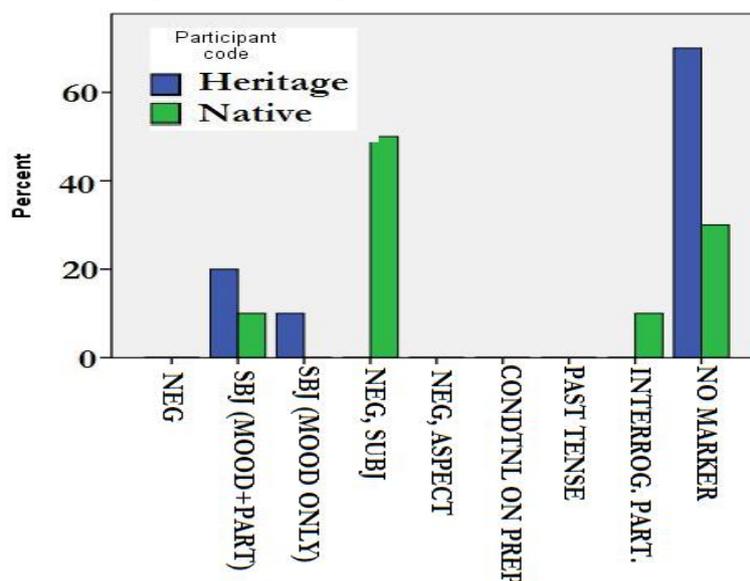
(17) *Не могли ли бы вы одолжить мне эту книгу? (See Fig. 2).*

Most heritage speakers (70%) again did not use any morpho-syntactic markers (no subjunctive, negative or interrogative particle)<sup>7</sup>. However, they diversified lexical means of mitigating their requests. In addition to the combination of the impersonal modal *можно* and lexical politeness marker *пожалуйста*, heritage speakers also used modal operators (*может быть*), inflected modal (*можете*) and impersonal modal by itself:

(18) *Может быть, Вы мне помочь можете?*

(19) *Я хотела узнать, если вы можете мне её дать на несколько дней?*

(20) *Можно я у вас на пару дней её заберу?*



Just as in the first scenario, the majority of heritage speakers oriented their requests to speakers (80%) whereas native speakers group was split 50–50%: half focused on the speaker, and half on the hearer<sup>1</sup>.

The data in the study suggest that despite important similarities, there are significant differences between requests made by heritage speakers and native speakers of Russian. While both groups opt for the indirect strategy and rely mostly on the interrogative, their repertoire of other

<sup>7</sup> Notably, heritage speakers make attempts at using the subjunctive, but they usually omit the subjunctive particle *бы*, using only the past tense form of the verb (*Я хотел знать, если я мог...*). Note the absence of *бы* in this sentence.

available strategies differs. In scenario 1 where the social distance between interlocutors is minimal, some native speakers use an imperative (mood derivable), in line with what has been shown by previous researchers (Mills 1992, Dong 2009). Heritage speakers never use the imperative, but rather employ a unique strategy that has no counterpart in the native speaker data: an embedded interrogative. This syntactic form occurs more frequently in scenario 2 where the social distance between interlocutors is increased. This strategy seems to be a pragmalinguistic transfer from English. As we know, the socialization of Russian heritage speakers happens primarily in the English language context outside of home. Therefore, on the one hand, they lack the necessary exposure to the variety of requestive strategies in full Russian, especially when it comes to formal situations. On the other hand, they sense the need to soften the request when the social status of their addressees is higher than their own. As a result, heritage speakers use what is available to them: they calque English strategy onto Russian.

Heritage speakers seem to show at least some knowledge of the conventionalized indirect polite requests in Russian: they employ the possibility and permission modals (*мочь* and *можно*) in interrogatives. However, they do not seem to differentiate between them, on the one hand, and, on the other, fail to use the morpho-syntactic means of softening the request available in full Russian: namely, the subjunctive and negation. Since heritage speakers have an impoverished repertoire of morpho-syntactic strategies to make indirect polite requests in Russian, they compensate by relying on their English pragmatic knowledge and, as a result, over-use the Russian lexical marker *пожалуйста* (transfer effect). Using this marker must seem like a safe choice to heritage speakers: if all else fails, *пожалуйста* will indicate that the request is meant to be polite. After all, *пожалуйста* and the English *please* are indeed synonymous in meaning (though *please* has somewhat different, wider conditions of use).

In addition to overusing the politeness marker, heritage speakers tend to formulate most of their requests by utilizing the impersonal modal in an interrogative. This produces a construction that in full Russian is normally associated with a request for permission. Notably, heritage speakers produce this construction regardless of the social factors: questions with *можно* comprise two thirds (60%) of all heritage speaker requests in scenario 1, and half of requests in scenario 2. If we consider that out of a total 20 head acts produced in both scenarios, 13 were framed as interrogatives, and in 10 of them the modal *можно* was used, we arrive at the conclusion that 77% of all interrogative utterances were framed as requests for permission. In the majority of cases, the use of *можно* would be ungrammatical or, at least, odd in full Russian: the form seems to indicate a request for permission whereas the context calls for a general request for favor. In addition, if we consider that the impersonal modal was also used in affirmative utterances in which an interrogative was embedded, the total percentage of requests with *можно* increases to 91%. The majority of these requests made by heritage speakers would be interpreted by native speakers as requests for permission.

These numbers stand in stark contrast to the native speaker data which indicate that only 4 utterances (in both scenarios) employed the modal *можно*. A puzzling question arises as to why heritage speakers interpret both situations as requiring a request for permission. Furthermore, in the majority of cases, *можно* appears with *пожалуйста*, a combination that is not desirable or even unacceptable in full Russian:

(21) #*Можно мне, пожалуйста, посмотреть конспект урока?*

How does this combination arise and what function does it fulfill in Heritage Russian? The combination of *можно* and *пожалуйста* may be a result of two separate linguistic processes that take place simultaneously in heritage Russian. On the one hand, English structures undoubtedly influence the Russian spoken by heritage speakers, hence the effect of transfer, specifically in the over-use of *пожалуйста*. On the other hand, internal restructuring takes place based on overgeneralization and simplification of the home language. Let's take a closer look at the two processes resulting in an unacceptable combination of #*можно пожалуйста*.

First, the combination of the modal *may* and politeness marker *please* is quite allowable in English when asking for permission: *May I leave the room, please?* Similarly, modal *can* occurs with *please* in the most frequent form used for general polite indirect requests in English, e.g., *Can you pass me the salt, please?* Furthermore, since English indirect requests conventionally use a possibility modal *can/could* at some times interchangeable with *may* (Brown & Levinson 1987), heritage speakers may overgeneralize *можно* to include the full range of meanings that *can/could* and *may* bear in English. As was shown above, heritage speakers engage in pragmlinguistic transfer from English. It is possible that they view *можно* as a possible Russian equivalent of the English modals *may* or *can*, which are combinable with the lexical politeness marker *please/пожалуйста*.

Second, since heritage speakers are notoriously inattentive to smaller morphological details (Polinsky 2000, 2005, 2008a,b), it is possible that they are not fully aware of the formal differences between the possibility modal, *мочь (можешь, можете, мог(ли) бы)*, which falls into the category of the alethic modality, and the impersonal modal *можно*, which belongs to the deontic modality. In other words, they may not be aware that by using the impersonal modal, they are suggesting the interpretation of their requests as requests for permission. Furthermore, since English indirect requests conventionally use a possibility modal *can/could* at some times interchangeable with *may* (Brown & Levinson 1987), heritage speakers may overgeneralize *можно* to include the full range of meanings that *can/could* and *may* bear in English.

Third, since heritage speakers are socialized into Russian primarily in the confines of their homes and use Russian with parents mainly in childhood, the type of requests they routinely make are very likely to be indeed requests for permission:

(22) *Можно мне посмотреть мультики?*

(23) *Можно мне конфетку?*

(24) *Можно пойти на улицу?*

And finally, at least in some contexts the combination of *можно пожалуйста* is allowed in the language of the metropolis to produce a general request, particularly when there is no verbal element involved:

(25) *Можно, пожалуйста, стакан чая?*

Thus, it is possible that heritage speakers have heard, at least in some contexts, such combinations from their parents and other adults whom they regard as language authority.

I hypothesize that this combination of factors including linguistic and socio-linguistic elements leads to the restructuring of the conventionalized polite indirect requests among Russian heritage speakers. *Можно* stops being a marker of a request for permission and becomes a marker of a polite request in combination with *пожалуйста*.

The final point of discussion is the orientation of requests made by native speakers and heritage speakers in this study. There are abundant references in the literature to the fact that Russian tends to use hearer-oriented requests and is different in this regard from English (Mills 1992, 1993; Owen 2001, Frank 2002, Wierzbicka 1991, 1997). The data in this study show that heritage speakers follow the behavior of English native speaker, diverging from their Russian native speaker counterparts, especially in the first scenario. This seems to be a transfer effect, and if so, the data indicate that cross-linguistic influence can touch even those “soft” areas of pragmatic knowledge that are very vague, subconscious and unregistered even by linguistically savvy native speakers. Yet, when compromised, these areas could be the reason for why sometimes native speakers judge somebody's speech as “not quite right” and “a little off.”

Interestingly, in scenario 2 Russian native speakers use speaker-oriented requests as frequently as hearer-oriented ones. As an explanation, I can suggest the consideration of a negative face threat to the hearer. In scenario 2, the social distance between interlocutors is increased,

and the degree of imposition may be interpreted by some speakers as being great: it is one thing to request lecture notes from a fellow student; to ask a professor to borrow a rare book which may be quite valuable is something entirely different. Perhaps, in this situation some Russian native speaker participants felt compelled to protect their professor's freedom from imposition by shifting the focus to themselves and formulating speaker-oriented requests.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have described the pragmatic competence of Russian heritage speakers using requests as an example. My main goal was to fill a significant gap in the description of the linguistic profile of heritage speakers and to invite further investigation of heritage language pragmatics by setting a precedent for Russian.

I presented the results of an experimental pilot study which involved 10 heritage speakers and 10 age-matched native speakers of Russian who performed role enactments of two social situations which required participants to produce a request. Although heritage speakers are similar to the control group in choosing indirect strategies (namely, interrogatives) to formulate a request, they differ in the construction of the interrogatives and in their use of request softening devices. Heritage speakers seem to have an impoverished repertoire of morpho-syntactic means for producing indirect polite requests available to native speakers: namely, the subjunctive, modal forms and negation. In order to compensate for this deficiency, they employ their English pragmatic knowledge and transfer that knowledge into Russian. As a result, they over-use lexical politeness marker *пожалуйста*, which is the equivalent of the English *please*. In addition, heritage speakers may have re-analyzed the specifically Russian impersonal modal *можно*, generalizing it to include both requests for permission and general requests for favor. This may be the result of transfer due to similarity between *можно* and the English possibility modal *can/could*, or the outcome of over-generalization of the usage of *можно* in Russian. The pragmalinguistic transfer of the usage of lexical politeness marker *пожалуйста* and possible internal restructuring of the meaning and usage of *можно* result in a combination of *#можно пожалуйста*, often followed by a verb, a combination that is unacceptable or at least undesirable to native speakers: *#Можно мне, пожалуйста, посмотреть конспект урока?* The frequency of this construction in the experimental data suggests an emergence of a new communicative norm among heritage speakers of Russian. A combination of the impersonal modal and lexical politeness marker becomes a formula for conventionalized indirect polite requests in heritage Russian.

Although in the Results and Discussion Section I focused on the description of differences between the two groups and possible explanations for these differences, a point needs to be stressed that, despite some divergence from the conventions of full Russian, heritage speakers communicative performance is much closer to that of native speakers and significantly above that of second language learners even after 3 years of university language study. The current study adds to the mounting evidence demonstrating that heritage speakers have communicative advantages over second-language learners of Russian. While their requestive forms differ from those made by native speakers, all but one speaker in the study achieved the communicative goal of making a request. This speaker failed only in the more formal situation. Thus, as prior researchers have noted, heritage speakers are indeed speakers of the language – they communicate in ways that, while sounding somewhat “off”, are still clearly understandable and understood by the native speakers.

The remaining gap between the heritage speakers and native-like competence can be addressed by classroom instruction in the language. A systematic study of pragmatic form-function relationships in full Russian is much needed as it will allow the teachers to recognize the specific deficits in the pragmatic competence of heritage speakers. Once these deficits are known, the teachers can make heritage learners conscious of the distinctions between their

forms and those used by native speakers, and with practice, bridge the gap between heritage and native speaker competencies.

In addition to its pedagogical implications, this study contributes to the field of pragmatics and general linguistics. It shows that incomplete acquisition of grammar together with transfer effect may lead to the emergence of a new communicative norm in heritage language. This finding is important to the study of language change in contact situations. It also leads us to ponder the question of first language instability under incomplete acquisition in the area of a speaker's communicative competence and the mechanisms available to natural languages to devise compensatory strategies.

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