
Discrepancies between use and intuition: Sociolinguistic effects on acceptability judgments in a heritage language

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This study investigates the distribution and acceptability of canonical and non-canonical word orders in Caucasian Urum, a heritage variety of Anatolian Turkish spoken in the Small Caucasus in Georgia. Urum permits flexible verb positioning within the VP, making it an interesting case to examine the interactions between syntax and discourse givenness. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines a speech production study and an acceptability judgment task (AJT), both manipulating the discourse status (given vs. new) of subject and object arguments to assess word order preferences.

The production data show a strong preference for canonical word orders (SVO/SOV), largely unaffected by discourse conditions. In contrast, the AJT results reveal no significant differences in acceptability of canonical (SVO/OVS) and non-canonical (OVS/OSV) orders across discourse contexts.

The discrepancy between production and judgment data raises questions about the reliability of acceptability judgments in heritage speaker populations. The absence of significant contrasts may not reflect syntactic flexibility or grammatical equivalence, but rather reduced metalinguistic awareness or limited confidence in judgment tasks, possibly due to the lack of formal education and the absence of a written standard in Urum.

Overall, the findings underline the value of mixed-methods approaches in linguistic research. Moreover, the study highlights the need to account for sociolinguistic factors, such as literacy and patterns of language transmission, when interpreting acceptability judgments, especially in heritage language communities.