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“Different? Yes. Incomplete? No.: Sourcing (some) differences in heritage language bilingualism to input quality differences”

In this talk, I will first introduce the audience to and problematize both the concept of what a heritage language bilingual is and the literature that has studied their competence outcomes in adulthood over the past two decades. Heritage speakers are native—often child L1 or 2L1—speakers of a minority “home” language who (usually) become dominant speakers starting at school-age in the external societal majority language of the national community in which they grow up and are educated. Typically, heritage speakers show interesting differences in their knowledge and performance in the heritage language as compared to age-matched monolinguals. Often, such differences have been labelled as instances of incomplete acquisition (e.g. Montrul 2008) or attrition (Polinsky 2011). Under both accounts, although for different reasons, heritage language bilingual differences are viewed as some type of deficiency. I will propose that many heritage bilingual differences, alternatively, could have only developed the way we see them in heritage grammars for reasons related to qualitative differences in the input heritage speakers receive (e.g. Rothman 2007; Pires and Rothman 2009; Pascual y Cabo and Rothman 2012). In doing so, I will link a process of cross-generational L1 attrition to (some) outcomes in heritage language development. I conclude by suggesting that many aspects argued to be incompletely acquired in heritage language grammars are in fact complete, but unavoidably different.