



Volume 72

Issue 1 *Volume 72, Numbers 1-2. Collaboration
Beyond the Classroom: Undergraduate
Research in Russian Language Studies*

Article 10

2022

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Recommended Citation

Laleko, Oksana and Miroshnychenko, Yana (2022) "Grammars in Contact: A Linguistic Study of Russian in Brighton Beach, New York," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 72: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol72/iss1/10>

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Grammars in Contact: A Linguistic Study of Russian in Brighton Beach, New York

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1. Introduction

Within the burgeoning linguistic field of heritage language studies, two research traditions have emerged in recent years. The first, adopted most commonly in the studies of less robustly maintained heritage languages, draws generalizations across grammars instantiated in individual heritage language idiolects, taking as its focal point what diachronic linguists term the *innovation* phase of language change (Croft, 2000). The other approach, manifested most representatively in accounts of linguistic varieties emerging in relatively more established speech communities, focuses more closely on features that become conventionalized among heritage language speakers, a component of language change known as *propagation* (Croft, 2000). Considering the relatively restricted socio-demographic niche of Russian in the United States (Laleko, 2013), most available linguistic investigations of structural properties of Russian as a heritage language in the U.S. have been carried out within the former approach, with data typically drawn from speakers recruited outside of clearly demarcated communities and undergoing language change independently of one another.

This geographically bound study¹ traces the dynamics of heritage language use within the largest integrated community of Russian speakers in the U.S., located in Brighton Beach, New York. Most prior research on Brighton Beach Russian has been observational in nature, focusing predominantly on the sociodemographic and

¹ The study was funded by the Academic Year Undergraduate Research Experience (AYURE) grant from the Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activities office at SUNY New Paltz, aimed at supporting student-faculty collaborative research and scholarship. The student investigator has actively contributed to all stages of the project and played a lead role in participant recruitment, implementation of the data elicitation protocol, transcription, and quantitative analysis and presentation of participant demographics.

linguacultural aspects of language transmission and use in the diaspora at large. Very little is known about the structural linguistic properties of heritage language varieties emerging in this rich, linguistically diverse multilingual context, leaving the door open to questions about the nature and directionality of grammatical change in heritage systems shaped within the confines of an established speech community. Our study takes the first step toward filling this gap. In bringing together two complementary research pathways of heritage linguistics—charting language use within a community and modeling grammars of individual speakers—this investigation serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it provides a linguistic benchmark for assessing more general questions about the ethnolinguistic vitality of Russian as a heritage language in the U.S.; on the other hand, it expands our grasp of the principles of heritage grammar formation by bringing into focus data from fluent Russian-English heritage bilinguals, a highly understudied population in the North American context.

2. Background

2.1. Historical presence of Russian speakers in Brighton Beach

We collected the data for this study in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Brighton Beach and Sheepshead Bay, which house a native-born population of 28,839 and a foreign-born population of 49,936, including 28,470 speakers born in Southern and Eastern Europe (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

The Russian and Soviet emigration to the New York City area is associated primarily with the settlement of Russian Jews at pinnacle periods of distress in Eastern Europe between the late 19th and 20th centuries (Conn, 2012; Orleck, 1999). The first wave of the emigration, beginning in 1881, brought the first substantial population of Yiddish speakers to New York. Having initially settled within Jewish enclaves throughout the city, many of these immigrants eventually moved to Brighton Beach as a consequence of a building boom in the 1920s. After World War II, middle-class migration to the suburbs left behind an aging population of first-wave Jewish retirees in Brighton Beach. Meanwhile, the immigrants of the second wave, which consisted of Holocaust survivors and people who had been displaced by the upheaval of World War II, were receiving resettlement assistance from aid-based

organizations such as the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) (Conn, 2012; Orleck, 1999).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, many of the elderly first- and second-wave immigrants had either died or moved to less densely populated areas across the country, leaving behind residential and commercial vacancies in their wake. Soviet immigrants comprising the third wave of the Russian-speaking emigration to the area viewed this phenomenon as an opportunity for revitalization, eventually replacing modest antiquated businesses with nightclubs, international grocery stores and markets, restaurants serving pan-Soviet cuisine, and designer clothing boutiques (Orleck, 1999). These efforts have been successful in allowing the newest generations of Russian-speaking immigrants with limited English fluency to develop networks of support among immigrant families.

2.2. The linguistic landscape of Brighton Beach

To date, no formal linguistic studies have systematically examined the trajectories of language maintenance in Brighton Beach, with language pattern documentation often serving a supporting role to the more prominently addressed issues of cultural integration and identity. Most available linguistic descriptions highlight the community's pervasive use of code-mixing, for example, *Мне нужна **brush** для моих волос* [I need a brush for my hair] (Visson, 1989), including its effects on script choice strategies in classified ads and signs (Angermeyer, 2005). Approached from this angle, recent sociolinguistic work has challenged the conception of Russian as a key player in the linguistic landscape of Brighton Beach, showing Russian signage to be employed rather restrictively (Litvinskaya, 2010). The best and most recent exemplification of English's role in the creation of a broader identification among Brighton Beach residents is the name change of an iconic local grocery store from Taste of Russia to International Food immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Agrawal, 2022). This decision signals Brighton's ongoing evolution into a heterogeneous immigrant community that steers away from the speakers' collective ethnolinguistic identification with Russian, calling into question the validity of once-prevalent portrayals of this multinational area as "Little Russia by the

Sea.” However, as there has been no sociological or linguistic research regarding these changing sociolinguistic dynamics, we leave these issues to future investigations, turning instead to a review of studies drawing on the linguistic resources of Russian-speaking residents of Brighton Beach.

While a few linguistic studies have engaged Russian speakers from Brighton Beach to observe geographically independent linguistic phenomena, none have aimed specifically at providing a targeted account of the linguistic patterns characteristic of this community. For example, Brighton Beach is discussed in Kantarovich and Grenoble (2017) as the last remaining location where residents can still recall Odessan Russian. However, Odessan Jews have not been the dominant group in Brighton Beach since the 1990s, and the population that remains are mainly overhearers of the dialect. Grenoble (2013) has drawn on informal interviews with Russian-speaking Brighton Beach residents on the boardwalk as part of her investigation of co-constructions employed for completing another speaker’s sentence, finding them to serve as markers of solidarity and shared experience. Davidson and Roon (2008) involved six émigré Russian-speaking participants from Brighton Beach and Sheepshead Bay in a study of consonant duration in Russian phonology, focusing on acoustic differences between bilingual and monolingual speakers. In sum, despite the general recognition of diaspora Russian as an actively used and dynamically developing variety across multiple generations of Brighton Beach residents, no accounts to date have tapped into the linguistic riches of this community within the tradition of heritage language research.

3. The Study

3.1. Motivation and research questions

Slavic languages in migration have long been a subject of linguistic and sociolinguistic research (Andrews, 1999; Moser & Polinsky, 2013; Zemskaja, 2001). In recent years, with growing numbers of second- and third-generation speakers, the spotlight on this work has shifted to the study of heritage languages and their linguistic properties. In the U.S. context, grammatical features of heritage Russian have been investigated quite extensively both with reference to formally instructed learners enrolled in heritage language courses (Kagan, 2010) and naturalistic

bilinguals “in the wild” (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007), yielding important insights into the processes of heritage language change more generally and into the inner workings of the individual subsystems forming the grammatical engine of the Russian language.

Among the most frequently documented outcomes of change in heritage Russian is significantly reduced morphosyntactic complexity, manifested across verbal and nominal areas as a decrease in the number of categories and/or features, the elimination of irregularity, and the growth of analyticity (Brehmer, 2021; Laleko, in press). However, considering a high dispersion of Russian speakers in the U.S., participant samples employed in the existing studies have tended to involve bilinguals well integrated into the mainstream culture and exhibiting strong effects of language disuse, with almost no work conducted in input-rich community settings. In this sense, the present study provides a unique opportunity to expand the range of the available data and revisit the issue of morphosyntactic fragility as a hallmark property of heritage grammars in the context of varieties developing in linguistic environments that are more favorable to the preservation of grammatical complexity than the majority of existing studies allow (Laleko & Scontras, 2021). To focus our discussion and contextualize it to prior findings, we concentrate on three areas that have emerged as the most critical pillars of grammatical change in heritage Russian morphosyntax: case, grammatical gender, and verbal aspect.

3.2. Participants

The study involved 17 young-adult heritage Russian speakers between the ages of 18 and 25 ($M = 21.1$), all of whom completed a detailed sociodemographic questionnaire. The speakers were selected on the basis of their residence in the Brighton Beach area during their childhood years, with 11 speakers continuing to reside in the community to the present day. The majority of the participants were born in the U.S. ($N = 13$); four speakers were born in a Russian-speaking country (Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) and arrived in the U.S. as young children ($M = 5.5$).

Table 1. Demographic Information

Participants	N	Mean	Range
Total	17		
Born in U.S.	13		
Born in Russian-speaking country	4		
Gender			
Male	5		
Female	11		
Other	1		
Age		21.1	18–25
Main language of communication			
English	13		
Russian	0		
Can't decide (both)	4		
Language of upbringing			
% Russian		77%	25%–100%
% English		21%	0%–75%
% other		1%	20%
Encouragement to maintain Russian (1–10)		8.4	3–10
Age of Russian exposure		0	0
Age of English exposure		3.8	0–7.5
Age of switch to English		6.6	4–12
Current language use			
% Russian		17%	0%–50%
% English		83%	50%–100%

Each participant was exposed to Russian from birth; all but two were sequential bilinguals with a later onset of exposure to English ($M = 3.8$). Only one speaker reported regular exposure to a tertiary

language (Ukrainian) at home. The majority of participants reported greater exposure to Russian ($M = 77\%$) than to English ($M = 21\%$) in their childhood, and for four speakers, Russian was the only language experienced in early childhood. For only two participants, Russian exposure constituted less than half of the overall input (25% and 40%). All but one participant reported a high level of encouragement from their family to maintain Russian ($M = 8.4$ on a 10-point scale).

Looking at the portion of the questionnaire dealing with the current patterns of language use, the average proportion of the use of Russian drops considerably by the time the speakers have reached adulthood (17%). At best, Russian and English are used in equal ratios (for two speakers); at worst, Russian is no longer used on a daily basis (for one speaker). Such variation in the use of the heritage language is commonly observed in adult bilinguals and may be attributed to the fact that some participants were students at English-speaking universities where they do not regularly encounter other Russian speakers.

Table 2. Use of Russian within the Last Six Months and Attitudes

	N	%	Mean	Range
Activities involving Russian				
Spoke on the phone	16	94%		
Listened to music	15	88%		
Socialized with friends	13	76%		
Watched a show or movie	12	71%		
Read a newspaper or short story	5	29%		
Visited a website	4	24%		
Read a book	4	24%		
Attended a community event	3	18%		
Attitudes to Russian (1–10)				
Importance of maintaining			8.4	3–10
Willingness to speak			7.9	2–10
Connection to language			7.5	2–10
Connection to culture			6.2	1–10

To obtain a more fine-grained picture of the participants' ongoing relationship with the Russian language, our survey included questions about the types of activities they had recently undertaken in the heritage language and their attitudes to the language (Table 2). Most participants had socialized in Russian to some degree within the last six months, which affirms that the Russian language maintains a presence in their lives. The most common contexts of socialization included the home, family functions, doctors' offices, and grocery stores in Brighton Beach. Only 18% of participants had attended a Russian-speaking community event within the last six months. Although a possible effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the data were collected, this result nevertheless aligns with the general observation that Russian language use by young adults (in contrast to older speakers) in Brighton Beach is less community-based and more centered around the tight-knit networks of friends and family and occasional interactions with customer service.

With respect to activities that do not require in-person contact, the questionnaire revealed a significant preference for the more passive forms of media consumption, such as listening to music (88%) and watching a television show or movie (71%), over the more active forms of language engagement that presuppose literacy, such as visiting a website (24%) or reading a newspaper (29%) or a book (24%). These results provide an interesting point of comparison with the previous literature. For example, Kagan's (2010) survey of heritage Russian learners enrolled in college-level classrooms positioned the most prevalent areas of heritage language use as follows: speaking on the phone (90%), listening to music (75%), watching TV or videos (69%), visiting a website (52%), reading a newspaper or a book (30%–40%), and attending community events (14%). While converging with these trends on the axis of spoken language use, our results also reveal a contrast between heritage *learners* surveyed in Kagan's (2010) study and heritage *speakers*, our present focus, in the domains related to the participants' levels of biliteracy, with formally instructed learners showing a predictably higher propensity to use their reading and writing skills in real-world settings.

Turning now to analysis of the speakers' attitudes toward the Russian language, the 10-point ratings reveal that speaking Russian serves more to express linguistic solidarity ($M = 7.5$) than to mark identification with the Russian culture ($M = 6.2$). The relatively higher median rating

for the linguistic over cultural connection with Russian is indicative of a community comprised of diverse nationalities and identities. For instance, in commenting on their responses in a follow-up interview, some participants identified Judaism to be central to their identity, positioning themselves as mere appreciators of the Russian culture. Other participants considered themselves to be avid consumers of Russian media and food, aligning themselves with the Russian identity as a result. Despite this diversity in cultural identification, most speakers still rated their willingness to use and maintain Russian highly ($M = 8.4$), further emphasizing Russian as the lingua franca of the community.

Table 3. Formal Instruction in Russian and Proficiency

	N	Mean	Range
Formal instruction			
Yes	11		
No	6		
Duration (years)		3.3	<1–9
Proficiency self-ratings (1–10)			
Understand Russian		9.1	8–10
Speak Russian		6.9	2–8
Read in Russian		5.4	1–10
Write in Russian		3.1	1–7
Words per minute (WPM)		93	46–136

While most participants (11 speakers) had received some formal instruction in Russian ($M = 3.3$ years), the duration, quality, and context of instruction is highly varied within the group. Five participants reported having received Russian instruction in their country of origin or in the Big Apple Academy, a local K–8 private school that includes coursework in the Russian language and literature; two participants reported having taken heritage Russian classes at a university.

All speakers were asked to rate their Russian language abilities in the four main areas of linguistic competence. As commonly observed in studies with heritage bilinguals, the highest self-ratings were obtained in the domains of understanding ($M = 9.1$) and speaking ($M = 6.9$), with

relatively lower ratings for reading ($M=5.4$) and writing ($M=3.1$). Notably, the range of individual variation was minimal for spoken language comprehension (between 8 and 10), with all participants expressing a high level of confidence in their receptive abilities, as expected considering the speakers' affiliation with a large and active Russian-speaking community. Conversely, the wide range of variation in the self-ratings of formally acquired skills (reading [1–10], writing [1–7]) underscores the predominantly aural path to language acquisition and maintenance in this community.

To further assess the speakers' fluency in Russian, we utilized an independent proficiency measure, number of words spoken per minute (WPM), shown in prior research to correlate with the heritage speakers' grammatical abilities (Polinsky, 2006, 2008a). To calculate WPM, we used the recordings employed in the main experiment. Despite significant variation, the average WPM value for the group ($M=93$) was comparable to the average baseline rate of 95 reported for monolingual Russian speakers (Laleko & Dubinina, 2018) and exceeded rates reported in previous studies with adult heritage Russian speakers: WPM = 89 (Laleko & Dubinina, 2018) and WPM = 88 (Dubinina & Malamud, 2017), placing our participants at a very high level of functional fluency in the heritage language.

3.3. Methodology

After completing the pen-and-paper sociolinguistic questionnaire (in English) and an informal follow-up interview (in Russian), the participants were shown a five-minute silent film titled *The Man and the Thief* on a laptop computer and asked to retell its plot in Russian. The silent film was selected based on its high potential to elicit ample instances of the grammatical properties under consideration. In addition to featuring characters of different genders (one woman and two men), it depicts a series of static and dynamic events that unfold continuously throughout the presentation and culminate in an unexpected twist.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Case

Restructuring of the case system is perhaps the most frequently observed development in heritage Slavic languages in contact with English. In the U.S. context, the six-case nominal paradigm of Russian has been shown

to contract to various degrees across the heritage language proficiency spectrum, yielding only a binary nominative-accusative contrast at its lowest sectors (Polinsky, 2008b). In the domain of argument marking, the directionality of case shift has been shown to follow a predetermined path, with the dative replaced by the accusative for indirect objects and the accusative replaced by the nominative for direct objects, lexically governed cases, and prepositional obliques (Kozminska, 2015 for Polish; Polinsky, 2008b for Russian).

Despite these robustly documented trends in deeply restructured grammars, the onset and extent of their manifestation across heritage varieties remain subject to investigation, with some studies pointing to a relatively higher stability of the Slavic case paradigm under certain conditions. For example, literate, college-instructed heritage learners have been shown to utilize all core distinctions of the baseline Russian system, with only occasional functionally motivated shifts (Isurin & Ivanova-Sullivan, 2008; see also Kisselev et al. (2021) for a comprehensive argument in favor of form-focused instruction in heritage Russian pedagogy).

Furthermore, research with heritage speakers in communities characterized by high ethnolinguistic vitality has similarly shown impressive diachronic stability of case systems in such contexts. Looking at three generations of Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian speakers in Toronto, Canada, a variationist study by Łyskawa and Nagy (2020) found few principled differences in the use of case forms by heritage and homeland speakers. Strong retention of case forms and functions was likewise reported in Wolski-Moskoff (2019) for fluent Polish-English bilinguals in the Chicago area, with a more profound change observed only at the lowest levels of heritage language proficiency. Against this empirical backdrop, our analysis of case forms sought, first, to examine the degree of case change in the corpus overall and, second, to trace the key patterns in the use of noncanonical forms.

We found a total of 28 occurrences of noncanonical case forms (henceforth referred to as “errors”) in our corpus. Nearly half (eight) of the speakers in our sample made no errors with case; seven speakers made between one and three case errors, and two speakers made seven case errors each. In line with prior research, the nominative served as the most commonly used replacement case form, accounting for 12 instances of case misuse in the corpus. As observed in earlier studies, the

nominative occurred both with direct objects and with obliques, including after prepositions (e.g., *забрала её сумка*_{Nom} instead of *забрала её сумку*_{Acc} [grabbed her purse], *бежит за поезд*_{Nom} instead of *бежит за поездом*_{Instr} [running after the train], and *с вот эта*_{Nom} *мужчина*_{Nom} instead of *с вот этим*_{Instr} *мужчиной*_{Instr} [with this man here]). It is notable that the majority of these instances (seven forms) involved the word *мужчина* [man], a lexically masculine noun that falls into the same declension class as the majority of Russian feminine forms and appears to have been reanalyzed as feminine for some heritage speakers (a point to which we return in the next section). What is relevant here is that the effects of this reanalysis appear to extend beyond gender agreement, cascading into the use of case morphology as a likely consequence of higher processing costs associated with formally opaque nouns in heritage Russian (Laleko, 2018). If so, difficulties displayed by some speakers with the selection of the relevant case forms for the word *мужчина* [man] are likely more formal than structural in nature and as such do not necessarily signal dissolution of the Russian case system more generally. This is further evidenced by the fact that the expected, canonical case forms often occurred on the agreeing elements, such as demonstratives and adjectives, within the noun phrase containing the opaque noun, for example, *ограбит этого*_{Acc} *мужчина*_{Nom} instead of *ограбит этого*_{Acc} *мужчину*_{Acc} [will rob this man] and *обняла этого*_{Acc} *доброе*_{Acc} *мужчина*_{Nom} instead of *обняла этого*_{Acc} *доброе*_{Acc} *мужчину*_{Acc} [hugged this kind man].

Other common case replacement strategies attested in the corpus included shifts from a preposition-governed oblique to the accusative, as illustrated in example (1); to the genitive (e.g., *в этом*_{Prep} *фильма*_{Gen} instead of *в этом*_{Prep} *фильме*_{Prep} [in this film]); or to a syncretic form ambiguous between the accusative and genitive cases (e.g., *бегают за этого*_{Gen/Acc} *вором*_{Instr} instead of *за этим*_{Instr} *вором*_{Instr} [running after this thief]).

(17)	Короче, shorter	он he. _{Nom}	побежал ran. _{M.Pf}	за after	эту this. _{F.Acc}	мужчину man. _{Acc}
	который who. _{M.Nom}	взял took. _{M.Pf}	её her. _{F.Acc}		сумочку. little-purse. _{F.Acc}	

“So, like, he ran after this man who took her purse.”

Instances of case errors were also attested in the domain of pronouns, in which baseline Russian exhibits significant allomorphic variation, for example, *перед неѐ* instead of *перед ней* [before her] and *помог еѐ* instead of *помог ей* [helped her].

4.2. Gender

Next, we turn to grammatical gender, another domain in which heritage Russian morphosyntax has been shown to undergo various degrees of change. Looking at gender assignment mechanisms employed by heritage Russian speakers in the U.S., Polinsky (2008a) argued that advanced and intermediate grammars exhibit a shift from the declension-based three-gender system of baseline Russian to a more formally transparent, phonologically governed system, with nouns grouped into three classes largely on the basis of their endings: nouns ending in a consonant are masculine, nouns ending in a stressed *-o* are neuter, and all remaining nouns are feminine. This system is further streamlined in low-proficiency speakers, who retain only the binary masculine-feminine contrast as determined by the nominal ending (consonant or vowel, respectively), with neuter nouns absorbed into the feminine class (Polinsky, 2008a).

Prevalence of formal, ending-based cues has also been attested in gender agreement strategies employed by heritage speakers, manifested particularly robustly in contexts in which the baseline system is characterized by irregularity or underspecification and associated with contextual variation. Targeting fixed and variable agreement patterns with animate sex-differentiable nouns in Russian, Laleko (2018) documented a significant trend toward reanalysis and regularization of opaque (e.g., *папа* [dad]) and referentially ambiguous (e.g., *доктор* [doctor], *коллега* [colleague]) forms in fluent adult English-dominant heritage Russian speakers with an otherwise potent grasp of gender agreement. Studies conducted in Norway have uncovered similar but more pervasive patterns of gender regularization in young heritage Russian bilinguals: in unbalanced speakers, gender distinctions were either reduced to the masculine-feminine contrast or altogether replaced by the masculine default (Rodina & Westergaard, 2017). In light of these findings, our analysis was aimed at determining the overall stability of gender marking in Brighton Beach heritage Russian, as evidenced by the occurrence of noncanonical forms and patterns of

agreement, and identifying the most distinctive processes of change in this morphosyntactic domain.

A total of 18 instances of noncanonical use of gender agreement were attested in the data. Approximately half of the speakers in our sample (eight speakers) made no errors with gender. Among the remaining participants, six speakers made only one error, and one speaker made two errors. The largest number of all errors in the sample came from two speakers, who made four and six errors, respectively.

Overall, the most common error type, accounting for seven instances, involved the use of a masculine agreement pattern with feminine nouns (e.g., *к какому-то*_{M.Dat} *станцию*_{M.Dat} instead of *к какой-то*_{F.Dat} *станции*_{F.Dat} [to some station]). It is notable that three instances of such overgeneralization included lexically specified forms referring to females: *женщина* [woman], *девочка* [girl], and *она* [she], as illustrated in example (2). While in line with prior studies pointing to a weakened relationship between gender form and gender reference in heritage Russian, these examples likely reflect difficulties with the online processing of agreement dependencies or with retrieval of the appropriate surface forms (e.g., *у него*_M instead of *у неё*_f [at her]) rather than signal underlying changes to the principles of gender assignment. As evident from the rest of the sentence in example (2), two out of three agreement forms match the feminine gender specification of the noun, confirming that the noun retains its feminine value:

- (18) Там была **один** женщина она бегала на поезд.
there was._F one._M woman._F she ran._{F.IMP} on train._{M.ACC}

“There was one woman; she was running to the train.”

The second most common error type, accounting for five instances in the corpus, involved reanalysis of the morphophonologically opaque masculine noun *мужчина* [man] into the feminine class based on its formal similarity with feminine nouns (the *-a* ending), for example, *эта*_f *мужчина*_m instead of *этот*_f *мужчина*_m [this man]. Since the occurrence of feminine agreement with masculine nouns in our data was limited to formally opaque nouns ending in *-a/-ja*, we consider these examples to be indicative of change affecting gender assignment.

Adherence to the phonological gender assignment principle was further manifested in our data as a neutralization of gender distinctions between neuter nouns ending in an unstressed *-e* and feminine nouns ending in an unstressed *-a*, resulting in a reanalysis of the less frequent neuter forms as feminine (e.g., *такая_F предложения_F* instead of *тако-е_{Neu} предложение_{Neu}* [such proposition]). However, outside of adjectival agreement, a trend toward an overextension of the neuter form was observed with the past-tense third-person verb *быть* [to be], attested in place of plural and singular masculine agreement (e.g., *там было_{Neu.Sg} скамейки_{Pl}* instead of *там были_{Pl} скамейки_{Pl}* [there were benches]; *способ ограбления было_{Neu.Sg}* instead of *способ ограбления был_{M.Sg}* [the method of theft was]). While infrequent in our corpus, these constructions are nevertheless worthy of future study as a likely indicator of an independent morphosyntactic development in the heritage language—a weakening of subject-verb agreement, with the neuter form of the past-tense copula developing into the unmarked agreement default occurring across singular and plural contexts in grammars affected by change.

4.3. Aspect

Among the most salient features within the verbal domain of Slavic languages is the category of aspect, morphologically encoded as a binary opposition between imperfective and perfective verb forms (e.g., *писа_{Imp} – написа_{Pf}* [wrote]). The acquisition and maintenance of aspectual distinctions in heritage Russian bilinguals has received ample attention in the literature. Several studies have documented a gradual disintegration of the perfective-imperfective contrast in the heritage language, with speakers at the lowest end of the proficiency spectrum making no productive use of aspectual morphology and retaining individual verbs in a single aspectual form tied to their lexical properties (Polinsky, 2006). However, research with child heritage speakers of Russian has shown aspectual morphology to be “spared” from change during the initial stages of grammatical restructuring (Bar-Shalom & Zaretsky, 2008), and data from advanced adult speakers have similarly pointed to difficulties with certain contextual functions of aspectual forms rather than with their morphological instantiation (Laleko, 2010). In light of these results, we examined our corpus for signs of change involving the use of aspectual forms. In what follows, we focus very narrowly on the realization of the

perfective-imperfective opposition in our data, leaving outside our scope other instances of change in the verbal domain abundantly represented in our corpus (e.g., verbs of motion, conjugational patterns, tense shifts, and the subjunctive).

Our results characterize verbal aspect as a relatively stable domain in Brighton Beach Russian, with only eight aspectual errors attested in the corpus. The great majority of our participants, 11 speakers, made no errors in their aspectual choices; five speakers made one aspectual error each, and only one participant used three non-target-like aspectual forms. All but two errors in the corpus involved the use of the imperfective form in place of the perfective form (*начинал_{Imp}* instead of *начал_{Pf}* [began], *нравились_{Imp}* instead of *понравились_{Pf}* [liked], *не знал_{Imp}* instead of *не узнал_{Pf}* [never found out], *бежал_{Imp}* instead of *побежал_{Pf}* [ran], *обнимала_{Imp}* instead of *обняла_{Pf}* [hugged], *ходила_{Imp}* instead of *зашла_{Pf}* [went in]). The opposite shift involved two noncanonical occurrences of the verb *купила_{Pf}* [bought] in a durative context, in which *покупала_{Imp}* is required in homeland Russian; one of these uses is illustrated in the second clause of example (3):

- (19) Она наконец-то купила билет но пока она
 she finally bought_{F.PF} ticket_{M.ACC} but while she

 купила там трейн ушёл.
 bought_{F.PF} there train left_{M.PF}

“She finally bought the ticket, but as she was buying it, the train left.”

In six out of eight instances, the noncanonical form produced by the heritage speaker constituted a morphologically simpler option by lacking a prefix that would have been necessary to derive the target aspectual form. Additionally, in six out of eight instances (including four of six instances of the overextension of the imperfective and both instances of the overextension of the perfective), the attested noncanonical aspectual form matched the lexical specification of the verb, with telic verbs (*buy*) occurring in the perfective form and atelic verbs (*like, know, run, walk*) used in the imperfective form. In the next section, we comment on these findings.

5. Summary and conclusions

Historically, linguistic descriptions of Brighton Beach Russian have disproportionately focused on its lexical properties, leaving a significant gap in the study of its grammatical structure. Meanwhile, a nearly three-decade-long tradition of empirical work on heritage Russian in the U.S., drawing largely on data from speakers removed from speech communities, has taken morphosyntactic change to be the focal point in heritage language development. Crossing these two lines of inquiry, this study sought to investigate grammatical innovations in the speech of adult heritage Russian bilinguals whose linguistically formative years were spent in the largest Russian-speaking community in the U.S. With this goal in mind, we employed a controlled speech production task to obtain and analyze speech samples from 17 heritage speakers of Brighton Beach Russian, focusing on three areas of grammatical change independently documented in other heritage Russian varieties in the U.S.: case, gender, and verbal aspect.

Our findings yield two observations, which will shape the concluding discussion presented in the remainder of this section. First, about half of our participants displayed no signs of overt grammatical change in any of the domains under investigation. These results caution against overly restrictive conceptualizations of heritage language systems as characteristically incomplete or divergent replicas of their source grammars, and underscore the status of heritage bilinguals as native speakers of both of their languages (Weise et al., 2022). These results also inevitably bring into focus the pivotal role a speech community can play in determining the rate and trajectory of heritage language change, calling for more heritage language studies to be conducted in settings conducive to language acquisition, use, and transmission in ways that are more similar to (while never fully identical with) contexts in which homeland varieties develop.

At the same time, our results unequivocally demonstrate that while a high degree of social entrenchment contributes to the preservation of morphosyntactic complexity in a heritage language, it does not entirely prevent grammatical restructuring or categorically reshape its underlying mechanisms. Across all three areas of grammatical change examined in our study, we encountered the same types of processes documented, perhaps to a more significant degree than that observed here, in other heritage varieties of Russian. Overall, nominal morphosyntax proved to be

more vulnerable to change than verbal inflection (Polinsky, 2018). Within the nominal domain, case marking has undergone the most significant reorganization, characterized by the default use of the nominative and strengthening of the more functionally central cases (such as the accusative and genitive) at the expense of obliques. Grammatical gender, while preserved to a relatively higher degree, has witnessed a similar push toward the default masculine pattern, counterbalanced in some cases by the overapplication of the phonological gender assignment principle. The verbal aspectual opposition has shown initial signs of streamlining, succumbing to pressures of complexity-reducing change on two axes: a decrease in formal redundancy (i.e., avoidance of prefixes) and an increase in semantic transparency (i.e., a closer alignment between aspectual forms and inherent verbal features). All of these observed tendencies fit organically within the diachrony of heritage language change established on the basis of work with speakers outside of speech communities, suggesting that existing linguistic models can be successfully extended to research in community contexts.

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